

**Men against Power:
Antistatism, Grassroots Organizing, and the Vietnam Veterans Against the War**

by

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the history of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) from its founding in 1967 through to the early 2000s. Whereas past scholars have interpreted VVAW's activism as motivated by the therapeutic promises of protest, disenchantment with U.S. foreign policy, and reverence for the peace and justice movements of the 1960s, the present analysis situates VVAW in the context of the larger antistatist movement that emerged during the unraveling of liberalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It argues that VVAW's activism, in addition to its clear antiwar purpose, represented an antistatist response to the top-down, technocratic features of the postwar liberal state. In doing so, it has three aims. First, it seeks to revive scholarly consideration of VVAW, an organization that is well known but has generated surprisingly little attention from historians since the late 1990s and early 2000s. Second, and equally important, it purposes a new perspective for understanding the postwar period, one that reinterprets sixties activism as part of a longstanding dialogue in American history regarding the limits of state power in an increasingly centralized system. Finally, this study projects a view of sixties protest that transcends simplistic categorizations of "liberal" and "radical," as well as "left" and "right," in order to draw out the cross-pollinating tendencies that existed between the postwar state's various critics, not least their mutual appeals for greater community control and decentralized ways of organizing.

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Historical Society, where the bulk of VVAW's records are held, and to the good people in charge of the Joseph A. Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan. The generous financial assistance provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Ontario Graduate Scholarship program, and the University of Waterloo made such research trips possible, and helped me withstand the lean years of graduate school. I am also indebted to Jan Barry, Barry Romo, Lee Thorn, and Terry DuBose for answering my calls and sharing their stories, and to Robert Sharlet who happily responded to my questions about his brother, Jeff Sharlet, one of the unsung heroes of the antiwar movement. John Lindquist and Annie Bailey were interviewed too late to have their oral testimonies integrated into the dissertation, but I wish to thank them here with the promise that the content of our discussions will be more thoroughly incorporated into the manuscript at a later date. I would also like to acknowledge Richard Stacewicz whose oral history of VVAW remains a largely untapped goldmine for sixties scholars.

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For Rachel,
Who suffered with me and paid her dues

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“The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.”

— Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979)

INTRODUCTION

The Antistatist Context

A deep and abiding suspicion of centralized authority runs throughout American history. Forged by interlocking historical developments involving religious freedom, capitalism, and a sprawling physical environment, antistatism emerged as a hallmark of American politics in the eighteenth century and has remained so ever since.¹ So apparent is this preference for decentralization that when Alexis de Tocqueville sat down to pen his assessment of nineteenth-century American political culture, he started at its base with the townships and municipalities. “To examine the Union before we have studied the states, would be to adopt a method filled with obstacles,” wrote the French aristocrat and scholar. For while the character of the township changes from county to county they “are always based upon the same principle,” he observed, “namely, that every [individual] is the best judge of what concerns himself alone, and the person most able to supply his private wants.”² The passage of time only solidified the nation’s inclination toward antistatist localism. As one labor historian confidently proclaimed in 1929: “The only bona fide American radical tradition is anarchy, and that, in spite of Thoreau, has been much less a doctrine than a fact.”³

In the years following this observation, the combined impact of the Great Depression and Second World War altered America’s relationship with government, but it did not quell the country’s deep-seated distrust of centralized authority. Despite the New Deal order’s triumph in

¹ For a detailed account of the historical roots of American antistatism, see David DeLeon, *The American as Anarchist: Reflections on Indigenous Radicalism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), chaps. 1-3. See also Saul Cornell, *The Other Founders: Anti-Federalism and the Dissenting Tradition in America, 1788-1828* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. and trans. by Isaac Kramnick (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007; originally published in 1835 and 1840), 52-53.

³ Norman J. Ware, *The Labor Movement in the United States, 1860-1895: A Study in Democracy* (New York: Appleton, 1929), 304, as quoted in DeLeon, *American as Anarchist*, 5.

the 1930s, and its later expansion under the Great Society initiatives launched by Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s, modern liberalism was never without its critics. Early in the postwar period, a small disparate group of conservative intellectuals (several of them European émigrés) emerged to provide the Right with a “systemic defense” against what they interpreted as the collectivist tendencies of the New Deal order. In place of an expanded welfare state, they championed individual rights, the free market, and personal liberty. Their union with a growing grassroots anticommunist movement formed the basis from which modern conservatism would ascend in the postwar era, developing into a formidable political machine that would eventually challenge and (in part) supplant the New Deal’s political and economic legacy.⁴ This narrative, told with great care for the sophisticated network of “suburban warriors” and thinkers that comprised postwar conservatism, has become the dominant paradigm through which the fall of modern liberalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s is interpreted.⁵ But conservatives were not modern liberalism’s only challengers. As early as the 1930s, leftists such as Walter Lippmann had voiced their displeasure with its centralizing, administrative features. A small minority of anarcho-pacifists, moreover, stayed the course during the war years, and in the late 1940s practiced their own forms of cooperative working and living free from the state’s expanding bureaucratic authority.⁶ By the 1960s, this “left-libertarian” ethic reached a crescendo in the antiwar, counterculture, New Left, and women’s liberation movements. A mutual distrust of state

⁴ Donald T. Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 6-40. See also Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁵ Kim Phillips-Fein, “Conservatism: A State of the Field,” *Journal of American History* 98, no. 3 (Dec. 2011): 726-727.

⁶ Walter Lippmann, *The Good Society* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005; originally published in 1937), 106-130; James Tracy, *Direct Action: Radical Pacifism from the Union Eight to the Chicago Seven* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996); James J. Farrell, *The Spirit of the Sixties: Making Postwar Radicalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 112-124.

encroachment united this eclectic assembly of activists, as did their shared affinity for the virtues of small-scale community organizing.

This study takes as its focus the theme of American antistatism in the post-World War II era. More specifically, it is concerned with the antiwar organization, Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). Whereas past scholars have interpreted VVAW's activism as motivated by the therapeutic promises of protest, disenchantment with U.S. foreign policy, and reverence for the peace and justice movements of the 1960s, the present analysis situates VVAW's history in the context of the larger antistatist movement that emerged during the unraveling of liberalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁷ It argues that VVAW's activism, in addition to its clear antiwar purpose, represented an antistatist response to the centralizing, technocratic features of the postwar liberal state and its commitment to what Franklin Roosevelt called "enlightened administration."⁸ Vietnam, after all, was a liberal war and the product of the New Deal's

⁷ Studies of VVAW are difficult to confine to specific "schools of thought." Nevertheless, what follows is a rough breakdown of the different interpretations of VVAW with the understanding that several of the following titles resist simple categorizations. For protest as therapy, see Robert Jay Lifton, *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans: Neither Victims nor Executioners* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973); Arthur Egendorf, *Healing from the War: Trauma and Transformation after Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985); Wilbur J. Scott, *The Politics of Readjustment: Vietnam Veterans Since the War* (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine De Gruyter, 1993); Gerald Nicosia, *Home to War: A History of the Vietnam Veterans' Movement* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001). Accounts of VVAW framed within the context of the antiwar movement can be found in Andrew E. Hunt, *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Richard Stacewicz, *Winter Soldiers: An Oral History of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 1997); David Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance during the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005; originally published in 1975); Charles DeBenedetti and Charles Chatfield, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press); Fred Halstead, *Out Now!: A Participants Account of the American Movement Against the Vietnam War* (New York: Monad Press, 1978); Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up?: American Protest Against the War in Vietnam* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984); Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle over Vietnam* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, Inc., 2005; originally published in 1994). For a look at how antiwar veterans were influenced by the "social and cultural upheavals" of the 1960s more broadly, see Richard Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers: GI and Veteran Dissent during the Vietnam Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996). On network television newscasts and their coverage of VVAW, see Mark D. Harmon, *Found, Featured, then Forgotten: U.S. Network TV News and the Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (Knoxville, TN: Newfound Press, 2011).

⁸ It should be stated here that postwar liberalism, like all forms of liberalism, was inherently malleable. Lasting from the mid-1940s through to the mid-1970s, its basic policies of economic growth, rights consciousness, anticommunism, and trust in large-scale institutions to solve complex problems both at home and abroad could take on a variety of forms, often accruing the support of Democratic and Republican presidents alike. This included Richard Nixon who, in addition to pursuing an aggressive interventionist foreign policy abroad, drew on the powers

ideological heirs. The same theory and application of state power that went into fighting social and economic ills at home went into opposing communism abroad.⁹ VVAW thus directed its criticisms as much against the consolidating, bureaucratic tenets of postwar liberalism as it did against the conflict in Southeast Asia. VVAWers may not have agreed with antistatist principles on the Right, but they concurred with its emphasis on localism and opposition to centralized power, even as they approached such goals from a competing perspective.

In locating VVAW's activism within a larger antistatist context, this study's purpose is twofold. First, it seeks to revive scholarly consideration of VVAW. For such a vital antiwar organization, surprisingly little has been written about its history since the late 1990s and early 2000s. The trend seems out of step with the rest of sixties' scholarship which, in the words of one historian, has since then grown into something of a "cottage industry."¹⁰ While literature on such sixties giants as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Black Panther Party continues to evolve, taking on new and eclectic forms, other topics of consideration either languish in relative obscurity or, as in the case of VVAW, patiently await a second opinion.¹¹ That Andrew Hunt's *The Turning: A*

of the modern executive to introduce a flurry of liberal legislation concerning the environment, arts and culture, health care, and Social Security. I state this observation as a point of context since much of VVAW's activism was conducted during Nixon's presidency. For Nixon's liberalism, see David Greenberg, *Nixon's Shadow: The History of an Image* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 304-337. On American liberalism's various "protean" forms, see Gary Gerstle, "The Protean Character of American Liberalism," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 4 (Oct. 1994): 1043-1073.

⁹ Lloyd C. Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1995), 104-126-177-200. On the influence of "growth liberalism" and the decision to intervene in Vietnam, see Robert M. Collins, "Growth Liberalism in the Sixties: Great Societies at Home and Grand Designs Abroad," in *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Farber (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 11-44.

¹⁰ Van Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretative History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), ix.

¹¹ For recent scholarship on SDS, SNCC, and the Black Panthers, see, for instance, David Barber, *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why It Failed* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2008); Harvey Pekar, *Students for a Democratic Society: A Graphic History*, art Gary Dumm, ed. Paul Buhle (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008); Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Andrew B. Lewis, *The Shadows of Youth: The Remarkable Journey of the Civil Rights Generation* (New York: Hill and Wang 2009); Iwan W. Morgan and Philip Davies, eds., *From Sit-ins to SNCC: The Student*

History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War and Gerald Nicosia's *Home to War: A History of the Vietnam Veterans' Movement* remain the only two full-length studies on VVAW aside from Richard Stacewicz's essential oral history, *Winter Soldiers: An Oral History of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War*, leaves a great deal of space for new contributions and fresh approaches.¹² Anchored around VVAW's key demonstrations and events at the national level, the works of Hunt and Nicosia present a moving organizational portrait of VVAW but do not offer the final word on its history. VVAW was mass and diffuse; its politics broader than its antiwar convictions suggested. Important as its national protests are to understanding its legacy, a more holistic account must also consider VVAW's grassroots organizing in local and state chapters, and the role it played in sustaining the organization's relevance after Communist troops rolled into Saigon in 1975.

Equally important, this study offers an alternative framework for discussing that ever-evolving period known as "the sixties."¹³ "Who owns the sixties?" and "when did the sixties happen?" are questions historians have pondered since a viable historiography began to take

Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012); Curtis J. Austin, *Up Against the Wall: Violence in the Making and Unmaking of the Black Panther Party* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2006); Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon* (New York: New Press, 2007); Judson L. Jeffries, ed., *Comrades: A Local History of the Black Panther Party* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Yohuru R. Williams and Jama Lazerow, eds., *Liberated Territory: Untold Local Perspectives on the Black Panther Party* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Judson L. Jeffries, ed., *On the Ground: The Black Panther Party in Communities across America* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010); Donna Jean Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

¹² The most recent VVAW study, Mark Harmon's *Found, Featured, then Forgotten*, is such an example, providing a unique take on the organization's history in the early 1970s and the coverage its demonstrations received in the national media.

¹³ When I employ the term "the sixties" I am referring to the historical period known as the "long sixties" which includes the 1970s. When I write about the "1960s," I am referencing the decade itself. For more on the concept of the long sixties, see p. 6.

shape in the late 1980s.¹⁴ Scholarly attempts to move the literature beyond the much-contested “declension thesis” posited by the first round of interpreters, many of them participant-observers, led to a wellspring of reconsiderations in the 1990s that have broadened and enriched our understanding of the tumultuous period. Where sixties history was once thought to parallel the tenure of SDS’s existence, from 1960 to 1969-1970, historians today have extended the decade’s chronology to describe what has been termed “the long sixties:” a period of sustained progressive activism beginning as early as the 1940s and ending as late as the 1980s.¹⁵ As part of this new paradigm, the legacy of SDS found itself couched within a broader continuum that extended backwards and forwards in time to reveal a “kaleidoscope of activism.”¹⁶ Feminists, ethnic liberationists, counterculture radicals, dissident GIs and veterans, Black Power organizers, and gay rights militants now populate accounts of the sixties, drawing the decade in greater complexity. Additional attempts to redefine the sixties era came from historians of postwar conservatism, whose literature mushroomed in the late 1990s and 2000s into a thriving subfield, honing in on such subjects as Young Americans for Freedom, suburbanization, and personalities

¹⁴ Rick Perlstein, “Who Owns the Sixties? The Opening of a Scholarly Generational Gap,” *Lingua Franca* 6, no. 4 (May/June 1996): 30-37; Andrew Hunt, “‘When Did the Sixties Happen?’ Searching for New Directions,” *Journal of Social History* 33, no. 1 (Autumn 1999): 147-161.

¹⁵ Studies most closely aligned with the first wave of sixties histories include Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984); Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987); and James Miller, “Democracy is in the Streets:” *From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Touchstone, 1987). For works representing the “long sixties” approach, see, for example, Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer...: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, “Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of American History* 75, no. 3 (Dec., 1988): 786-811; Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Andrew Hunt, “How New was the New Left?” in *The New Left Revisited*, eds. John McMillian and Paul Buhle (Philadelphia: Temple University, 2003), 139-155; Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left*; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233-1263; Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2006); Dan Berger, ed., *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010); Simon Hall, *American Patriotism, American Protest: Social Movements Since the Sixties* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Michael Stewart Foley, *Front Porch Politics: The Forgotten Heyday of American Activism in the 1970s and 1980s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013).

¹⁶ This phrase is from Anderson, *Movement and the Sixties*, 356.

like Barry Goldwater and Phyllis Schlafly. Grassroots radicals on the Right were among the decade's most effective activists, chroniclers argued, mindful of conservatism's later triumphs.¹⁷

The introduction of conservatism into the sixties narrative has done much to complicate previous assumptions about the postwar period. Scholars interested in the decline of the New Deal order, for example, have started to reconsider modern liberalism's historical continuity with the past. Instead of seeing its predominance from the 1930s to the mid-1970s as the fulfillment of an overarching liberal consensus in American history, some are now reading its relative decline as evidence of a "long exception" — a short pause in an otherwise consistent narrative of "antistatist individualism."¹⁸ This perspective fits nicely with the prevailing historiography on postwar conservatism, conforming to the field's well-worn ascension/declension/ascension thesis used to describe the high tide and death of liberalism and triumph of modern conservatism by the 1970s. Yet it also exists in some tension with the notion of the "long sixties" and the innumerable grassroots campaigns launched by progressive sixties veterans and their decedents in the 1970s and 1980s. Conservatives might have found success at the ballot box in these decades, but their grip on power was by no means absolute, and their cultural influence was even more limited. While the "long exception" came to an end, the "long sixties" remained a force of contention.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Mary C. Brennan, *Turning Right in the Sixties: The Conservative Capture of the GOP* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); John A. Andrew III, *The Other Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001); McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*; Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Critchlow, *Conservative Ascendancy*; Hall, *American Patriotism, American Protest*.

¹⁸ Jefferson Cowie and Nick Salvatore, "The Long Exception: Rethinking the Place of the New Deal in American History," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 74 (Fall 2008): 3-32; Lisa McGirr, "Now That Historians Know So Much about the Right, How Should We Best Approach the Study of Conservatism?" *Journal of American History* 98, no. 3 (Dec. 2011): 770.

As a way of bringing harmony to these two paradigms, this study argues on behalf of a new perspective for understanding the postwar era. It suggests that as historians continue to examine the decline of modern liberalism as evidence of a “long exception,” they would be wise not to ignore the eclectic strand of antistatism that characterized such left-leaning organizations as VVAW in this same period. Despite the often rigid historiographies separating the subfields of modern conservatism and the progressive activism of the 1960s and 1970s, constituents from both camps often shared a mutual mistrust of the postwar liberal state, revealing the historical dominance of antistatist localism as a dissenting tradition in the United States on both sides of the political spectrum.¹⁹ Similarly, many self-proclaimed “conservatives” embedded in the postwar state championed its essential features in practice, even as they exhorted against them in their rhetoric. Highlighting these continuities instead of the disconnections, breaks, and “ends of eras” that have long been the emphasis of countless histories, and contextualizing the “long sixties” within such a framework, complicates our understanding of the postwar period and challenges its periodization. Instead of holding to stale declension/ascension theories, or further compartmentalizing and self-containing vital protest movements, the sixties are reconfigured in more inclusive terms, as part of a longstanding dialogue in American history regarding the limits of state power within an increasingly centralized system. In moving toward such an approach,

¹⁹ In pointing out this continuity, I do not mean to over generalize right and left activism in the postwar period. Obviously, several groups on the Left did not share in this tradition of antistatism, most particularly those organizations associated with the Old Left such as the Communist Party USA. Likewise, many so-called traditional conservatives were more comfortable with top-down authority than their support for state’s rights would suggest. Nevertheless, a strong libertarian streak runs through both the Left and Right in the United States, a fact especially apparent in the 1960s and 1970s. Not even the CPUSA was immune to this reality. Despite the Party’s insistence on a centralized hierarchy, rank-and-file members typically exerted greater levels of autonomy in local chapters than is often recognized. For works that explore this shared antistatist connection, see Rebecca E. Klatch, *A Generation Divided: The New Left, the New Right, and the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); DeLeon, *American as Anarchist*; Cornell, *Other Founders*. On the Communist Party USA, see Hunt, “How New was the New Left?,” 152, n.18.

this study hopes to encourage new interpretations of the postwar period that reach beyond fractured narratives toward a more cohesive history of the era.

Finally, tied to this notion of antistatism as a unifying characteristic of postwar dissent is the question of how sixties activists should be defined. Like other progressive sixties groups, identifying VVAW as a leftwing organization is accurate, yet fails to account for the diversity of thought and action within its ranks. Broad based and eclectic, VVAW's politics ranged from moderate to Maoist, with different factions holding sway at different points in its history. In showcasing the range of thought in VVAW, this study projects a view of sixties activism that transcends simplistic categorizations of "liberal" and "radical," as well as "left" and "right," in order to draw out the cross-pollinating tendencies that existed between the postwar state's various critics, not least their mutual appeals for greater community control and decentralized ways of organizing. Much, to be sure, divided liberals from radicals in the late 1960s and 1970s, but as the story of VVAW shows, political monikers were often porous, if they existed at all in the minds of historical actors at the time, leading to a continuum of activism across the political spectrum focused around a sharpening critique of centralized managerial authority.

The evolution of VVAW since its founding in 1967 is the central narrative driving this study forward. Beginning as a small six-man operation confined to the country's Northeast, VVAW evolved into an imposing mass movement numbering in the tens of thousands with a membership stretching from California to Maine. Scholarly accounts of VVAW's history typically center on the group's creative use of protest in the early 1970s to anchor their analyses and convey its indispensable role in keeping "the antiwar movement alive at a time when so

many Americans had surrendered to cynicism and complacency.”²⁰ This project does not disparage such approaches; nor does it ignore the emotional power and originality that makes VVAW’s style of protest such a point of interest among researchers. It does, however, seek to expand our understanding of VVAW’s activism beyond what has been previously discussed. To this end, the present study extends a particular focus to VVAW’s many community-organizing efforts. Thoroughly decentralized, and always diverse in their tactics, VVAWers experimented with grassroots organizing, zeroing in on issues of national and local importance. The war in Vietnam, of course, remained dominant in their minds, but as the group evolved, so too did the scope and style of its activism. Peace, racial justice, care for veterans, prison rights, and gender equality became subjects of concern for countless chapters. Several of these issues were addressed in its various community action projects. These projects, multiple and divergent as they were, came to include free medical clinics, drug rehabilitation programs, discharge upgrade centers, job counseling, and experimental group therapy.

Instances of grassroots activism performed in the service of self-help are a running theme throughout American history, most notably in the decades before the Great Depression, when the federal government assumed a less interventionist policy on matters concerning economic welfare and social justice. Prior to the 1930s, working-class Americans looked to “the informal networks and formal organizations of their ethnic communities” to meet their welfare needs.²¹ In the 1920s, ethnic institutions and associations in the form of local banks, credit unions, and mutual benefit societies were the primary sources of relief. The Great Depression, however, changed this. “When local and private welfare efforts failed to meet the depression crisis, turning to the national government seemed the best way of redressing this wrong,” writes historian

²⁰ Hunt, *Turning*, 200.

²¹ Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 362.

Lizabeth Cohen, forcing “new solutions.”²² As part of its solution, the working class aligned with President Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal order’s idea of a “moral capitalism” supported by a generous, compensatory welfare state. By contrast, community activism in the sixties can be viewed as a reversal of this trend. VVAWers did not want a return to the social benefit societies of the 1920s, nor did they object to government assistance. But they, along with a growing number of Americans, no longer saw the postwar liberal state as capable of living up to its ideal of providing for the nation’s prosperity and security. Too many unwelcome developments had occurred by the late 1960s and early 1970s with the Vietnam War, Watergate, and state-directed subversion campaigns carried out by the FBI, CIA, and local police forces to trust the government’s practice of enlightened administration. Community control and more popular participation in determining how federal programs should operate now seemed indispensable for the very survival of real and meaningful democracy.

This suspicion of authority informed Americans of all political stripes by the 1970s, setting the stage for what one historian termed the “age of self-reliance.”²³ Revelations of government deceit, coupled with a grim economic downturn, left scores of citizens disenchanted with the status-quo and demanding some form of change. This temper took on several iterations. On the political Right, the charismatic southern politician George Wallace built a wildly successful campaign invoking anti-establishment rhetoric and populist identities.²⁴ Libertarian economists similarly emerged from the national sidelines in the late 1960s to find a growing legion of followers ready to embrace their classical liberal principles of individual liberty and free market economics. Splitting with the GOP, a Libertarian Party formed in June 1972 and

²² *Ibid.*, 364.

²³ Foley, *Front Porch Politics*, 17-25.

²⁴ Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster), 344-347, 466-467.

grew into the country's third largest party. Buttressed by a growing chorus of radical capitalists, the newly minted party posited the upending of graduated taxes, Social Security, and the influence of distant Washington bureaucrats as necessary solutions for curbing government overreach.²⁵ But conservatives were not alone in their antistatist inclinations. Mainstream progressives, disenchanted with the Democratic Party's standard bearers, demonstrated a preference for decentralization as "New Politics" liberals worked to wrest power away from party bosses by making political primaries more responsive to local voters.²⁶ Meanwhile, thousands of others joined in the burgeoning "citizen advocacy" movement: a decentralized, grassroots reaction, inspired by consumer advocates like Ralph Nader, that "sprang up in response to local conditions and evolved in response to both national trends and hometown idiosyncrasies."²⁷

On the Left, activists representing a range of causes, from racial empowerment to women's liberation, explored similar antistatist modes of community organizing throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Sensing the limitations of liberal reform, they created a vast network of subterranean "counter-institutions" designed to supplement and transgress the social welfare amenities promised by the postwar state. Collectively, their efforts included a creative assemblage of community unions, legal aid services, inner city food projects, underground newspapers, self-help gynecological clinics, abortion referrals, education programs, as well as thousands of communes, cooperatives, and collectives scattered across the country's urban and

²⁵ Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 126-133; Brian Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007), 290-443.

²⁶ Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 614, 509-514; Bruce Miroff, *The Liberals' Moment: The McGovern Insurgency and the Identity Crisis of the Democratic Party* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 154-176.

²⁷ Foley, *Front Porch Politics*, 28.

rural landscapes.²⁸ In pursuing these projects, tentative partnerships between sixties radicals on the Left and Right were occasionally struck. Calling “the present-day categories of ‘left’ and ‘right’...misleading and obsolete,” a small core of libertarian thinkers launched the alternative periodical *Left and Right: A Journal of Libertarian Thought* in 1965 to bridge the waters separating New Left activists from those regarded as their natural allies on the antistatist Right. “In their concrete struggles against centralized oppression, the young militants of the New Left are moving...toward a vision of the future that is the fullest possible extension of the ideals of freedom, independence, and participatory democracy: a free market in a free society,” wrote the

²⁸ Scholarly examinations of sixties community activism can be found in studies relating to specific groups and movements from the period. On the New Left, see Wini Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left: 1962-1968: The Great Refusal* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982); Miller, “*Democracy is in the Streets*”; Amy Sonnie and James Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power: Community Organizing in Radical Times* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2011). On the Civil Rights Movement, see Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984); Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007; originally published in 1995); Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008; originally published in 1995); Katherine Mellen Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). On the Black Panther Party, see JoNina M. Abron, “‘Serving the People’: The Survival Programs of the Black Panther Party,” *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press), 177-192; Jeffries, ed., *Comrades*; Jeffries, ed., *On the Ground*; Paul Alkebulan, *Survival Pending Revolution: The History of the Black Panther Party* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007). On women’s liberation, and women’s community activism in other movement organizations, see Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement & the New Left* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980); Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Rosen, *World Split Open*; Debra Michals, “From ‘Consciousness Expansion’ to ‘Consciousness Raising’: Feminism and the Countercultural Politics of the Self,” in *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and ’70s*, eds. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (New York: Routledge, 2002), 41-68. On gay rights, see Terence Kissack, “Freaking Fag Revolutionaries: New York’s Gay Liberation Front, 1969-1971,” *Radical History Review* (Spring 1995): 105-134; Robert McRuer, “Gay Gatherings: Reimagining the Counterculture,” in *Imagine Nation*, 215-240. On the sixties underground press, see John McMillian, *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Blake Slonecker, *A New Dawn for the New Left: Liberation News Service, Montague Farm, and the Long Sixties* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). On the counterculture, see Anderson, *Movement and the Sixties*, chap. 5; Farrell, *Spirit of the Sixties*, chap. 8; relevant chapters in Braunstein and Doyle, eds., *Imagine Nation*; Tom Fels, *Buying the Farm: Peace and War on a Sixties Commune* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012); David Farber, “Building the Counterculture, Creating Right Livelihoods: The Counterculture at Work,” *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics, and Culture* 6, no. 1 (2013): 1-24. On the environmental movement, see Andrew G. Kirk, *Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalogue and American Environmentalism* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2007).

anarcho-capitalist Murray Rothbard, one of the journal's founding editors.²⁹ Young libertarian radicals attracted to the counterculture's mix of anarchism and drugs likewise ventured across the political spectrum to join hippie communities, engage in cooperative businesses, and practice a life of minimalism.³⁰ The union Rothbard and others hoped to cement admittedly never materialized. But the popularity of antistatism remained a common denominator among activist groups well into the 1980s.

Antistatism, as the above examples suggest, was a pluralist pursuit in the sixties with no fixed expression. To reflect this reality, the present study employs a broad conceptualization of antistatism based less on clearly defined ideology than a preference for decentralized expressions of community control.³¹ "Consistency is not an anarchist virtue," writes the historian David DeLeon.³² Nor is it one most antistatists adhere to. To define antistatism too narrowly runs the risk of missing all of its complex varieties of scale, self-direction, and autonomy. Antistatism, after all, does not necessarily equal pure anarchy; rather, it is capable of a variety of expressions ranging from the moderate (advocates of *laissez-faire* liberalism and democratic localism) to the extreme (exponents of anarcho-capitalism and anarcho-syndicalism). Even as activists on the Left and Right in the late 1960s and early 1970s lost faith in the government's capacity to act in the public's interest, many still regarded some form of government as tolerable, if not essential,

²⁹ Editorial, "The General Line," *Left and Right: A Journal of Libertarian Thought* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1965): 3; Murray N. Rothbard, "Liberty and the New Left," *Left and Right: A Journal of Libertarian Thought* 2, no. 2 (Autumn 1965): 67.

³⁰ Klatch, *Generation Divided*, 148-156, 269-270.

³¹ My use of the term "antistatism" deserves some explanation. While other such descriptors were considered, each contained their own set of limitations. "Libertarian," for instance, though used on occasion in this study, seemed too partisan a word given the nature of contemporary politics and its near ironclad association with right-leaning figures like former Texas Representative Ron Paul and the wider Tea Party movement. "Anarchist" proved similarly problematic. Although some VVAWers were genuine anarchists, most members lacked the kind of theoretical rejection of the state and familiarity with philosophers like Proudhon and Kropotkin to assume such a title. Finally, the phrase "antiauthoritarian" was contemplated but ultimately jettisoned in favor of antistatism which does a better job of identifying what VVAW set itself against, and hinting at parallels to other political trends throughout American history.

³² DeLeon, *American as Anarchist*, 5.

to their idea of a just society. In other words, railing against the state did not preclude activists from working through established channels to secure their antistatist objectives. This was especially true of VVAW whose politics of antistatism evolved over time, taking on a variety of concurrent iterations not always easily reconciled. The complete abolition of the state was never VVAW's intention. With the exception of a small coterie of anarchists in the organization, most VVAWers were not against the government so much as they were against the corruption, arrogance, and callousness that often went hand in hand with the consolidation of power. In this, the majority of members followed a pragmatic policy of change, one in keeping with Henry David Thoreau's stratagem: "I quietly declare war with the State, after my own fashion, though I will still make what use and get what advantage of her as I can, as is usual in such cases."³³

The sources of VVAW's antistatism were complicated and in most cases could be traced back to the members' time in the Armed Forces. "It started with the anger about feeling they had been betrayed in some fashion, either in the war or after they came back by the VA," VVAW co-founder Jan Barry explained. "These are primarily people who enlisted. They had no questions about going there [Vietnam] in most cases, and it was the war experience that infuriated them."³⁴ Indeed, the bulk of VVAWers hailed from conservative backgrounds characterized by an intense anticommunism and a proud tradition of military service. They volunteered in the Armed Forces ready to serve their country.³⁵ They went to Vietnam as "true believers," said Barry Romo, a former national coordinator for the organization. "And when you slap true believers in the face with reality, people tend to become angry about it." The belief that they had been manipulated and abused by leaders in Washington fueled much of their rage. "We were mad at first Lyndon Johnson and then Nixon for sending us over and throwing away our generation's lives for

³³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 5.

³⁴ Jan Barry, interview with author, October 30, 2013.

³⁵ See specific oral histories in Stacewicz, *Winter Soldiers*, 28-64.

nothing. That feeling of being used and thrown away, it generates, I would say, [a certain] antiauthoritarianism” on the part of veterans, Romo concluded.³⁶ Connected to this, of course, was the role of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). “If you go to war you get PTSD, that’s all there is to it,” stated Lee Thorn, a member of the San Francisco chapter. And “if you’ve got PTSD, you’ve got a problem with trust.”³⁷

How the veterans experienced government during and after their service was often equally influential in cultivating the group’s antistatist identity. The military’s rigid top-down hierarchy and bureaucratic systems of power were sources of great frustration for the veterans, who chafed under its austere command structure. “I felt like they were trying to take my identity away from me, trying to turn me into a number,” stated Thorn. Added another veteran: “Most of the officers didn’t have a clue about what was going on, nor did they know how to lead.... [G]rowing up in the military, I knew what chain of command was, I knew what teamwork was....Very seldom was there that relationship with officers.”³⁸ This sense of alienation from sources of power continued on the home front in the vets’ encounters with the Veterans Administration (VA). Whereas in World War II the state opted to provide for its male veterans with a bountiful GI Bill offering compensatory benefit programs to assist returning soldiers with the readjustment process, Vietnam veterans did not enjoy the same level of commitment from the state.³⁹ A GI Bill was established, but its paltry appropriations never equaled the billions of dollars spent on its predecessor. Moreover, the limited services provided by the VA — whether related to health care, education, disability benefits, pensions, or employment — seemed

³⁶ Barry Romo, interview with author, November 25, 2013.

³⁷ Lee Thorn, interview with author, December 3, 2013.

³⁸ Lee Thorn and Mike McCain, interviews, *Winter Soldiers*, 94, 146.

³⁹ The 1944 GI Bill, or Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, suffered from its own shortcomings. On the politics surrounding the iconic piece of legislation, and how it discriminated against women, African Americans, and the working class, see Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 137-146, 156-160, 166-177.

perennially hampered by bureaucratic inefficiency and inadequate funding.⁴⁰ In such conditions, Vietnam veterans increasingly lost faith in the state, mirroring the already dissipating confidence a great many Americans had in institutional authority by the early 1970s. “In a time of record affluence, personal discontent seems undiminished,” noted one observer. “Most Americans now recognize they have been let down by their public institutions.”⁴¹

A lack of trust in government forms the context of this study. But the central narrative driving it forward is the history of VVAW. To tell this story, it relies on a chronological and thematic structure. Chapter One, assesses VVAW’s origins in the late 1960s, paying close attention to its anarchical organizing structure and participation in the 1968 presidential campaign. Where previous scholars have framed this period as representing VVAW’s liberal phase, this chapter argues on behalf of a more fluid understanding of sixties activism that sees liberals and radicals as part of an expansive political continuum on the Left with no fixed boundaries. Chapter Two carries the narrative forward into the early 1970s, to the height of VVAW’s popularity. Focusing on the organization’s three main demonstrations from 1970-1971 — Operation Rapid American Withdrawal, the Winter Soldier Investigation, and Dewey Canyon III — it looks at how VVAWers blended cultural and political activism together to create a unique antiwar Vietnam veterans culture rooted in guerrilla street theater, countercultural symbols, and a wide-ranging antistatism.

The explosion of grassroots, community activism among VVAW chapters in the 1970s and 1980s is the focus of the second half of this study. Dewey Canyon III might have been the group’s crowning achievement, but its aftermath did not spell the end for VVAW. On the

⁴⁰ For more on this, see Chapter Three.

⁴¹ David S. Broder, *The Party’s Over: The Failure of Politics in America* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971), 107, 106.

contrary, the organization experienced a burst creativity following the iconic demonstration, much of it organized and implemented outside the group's national headquarters in New York. Chapter Three, examines VVAW's localist tendencies as well as its battle against the VA's deteriorating hospital system. Rather than wait for those in Washington to reform the maligned agency, VVAWers interceded to create expressive, anti-hierarchical environments of healing echoing the era's larger emphasis on "prefigurative politics" — that is, the cultivation of "relationships and political forms that 'prefigured' and embodied the desired society."⁴² Chapter Four, continues this analysis by looking at VVAW's budding anti-imperialist mindset in its grassroots campaigns for racial justice and its involvement in the antiwar GI struggle. As the war wound down, VVAWers broadened their activism to maintain their relevance in a post-Vietnam War world. The final chapter, Chapter Five, considers the consequences of VVAW's fierce decentralism and the resulting campaigns by the FBI and ultra-left sects like the Revolutionary Union to infiltrate and undermine the organization from within. Although severely weakened, VVAW proved untamable and resuscitated itself in the late 1970s to provide energetic leadership and support to a variety of grassroots campaigns well into the 1980s. Also under consideration here is the evolving status of women in the group and the role they played as active contributors to its development. This study then concludes with an Epilogue that touches on VVAW's symbolic identity and relevance in the 1990s and early 2000s, as well as the significance of its antistatist activism in light of the discussion presented in the preceding chapters.

From the late 1960s to the late 1980s, VVAW clashed with the government over the Vietnam War, military policy, health care, entitlements, bureaucratic elitism, racial injustice, the centralization of authority, and FBI subversion. In doing so, it acted not in isolation but rather in

⁴² Breins, *Community and Organization*, 6.

concert with a wide-ranging antistatist political culture that emerged during the late 1960s and early 1970s. While this political development is generally associated with the rise of the New Right, left-leaning activists in liberal and radical circles contributed in their own ways to this trend, tapping into a deeply-held antistatist tradition in American history animated by debates over the proper function and limits of government. How VVAW expressed its antistatism varied throughout its history, though a deep distrust of concentrated power always remained a part of its identity, even into the 1980s when its membership lagged and conservatism had supposedly triumphed. Not satisfied to let those in positions of power go uncontested, many members carried these politics forward with them throughout their lives, never forgetting the legacy of VVAW or the lessons of Vietnam.

CHAPTER ONE

Unlikely Rebels

Members of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) were relative latecomers to the antiwar movement. Founded in June 1967, VVAW originated as a small, regional peace group confined primarily to the Northeast. Lacking the same confrontational identity it sported in the 1970s, scholars typically treat the early period of VVAW's history (1967-1968) as the group's liberal phase, a noteworthy but ephemeral chapter in its development predating the more radical and rebellious years that followed. VVAW certainly favored a tempered approach to its activism in these initial years. But it would be a mistake to characterize it as simply "liberal." Early VVAWers maintained a faith in the electoral process, often working within the Democratic Party, yet they did so imbued with a populist sense of democracy. While it is a false equivalency to suggest that liberalism and radicalism were one in the same to VVAWers, it is equally erroneous to compartmentalize sixties activism into neat and orderly boxes, separating one from the other. As the story of VVAW shows, greater fluidity existed between liberals and radicals in the late 1960s than scholars have previously suggested, much of it revolving around a mutual frustration with the centralizing features of the post-World War II liberal state.

Like many things born in the sixties, VVAW's origins trace back to a demonstration. It was April 15, 1967, the day of "The Spring Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam," one of the decade's largest antiwar gatherings. Dressed in a suit and tie with a raincoat overtop to blunt the elements, Jan Barry (formerly Jan Crumb) approached the eclectic crowd of demonstrators congregated in the southeastern corner of Central Park's Sheep Meadow. The 250,000 men and women assembled represented a cross-section of America. Youth, of course, predominated, but

standing amongst them were members of the soon-to-be-dubbed “silent majority” — businessmen, homemakers, school teachers, churchgoers.¹ Also present were hundreds of veterans, most of them World War II and Korean War vets representing the Veterans for Peace in Vietnam. Encouraged, Barry heeded the call: “All Vietnam veterans to the front!” About a dozen others joined him, carrying a sign reading “Vietnam Veterans Against the War.” Filing out of Central Park, down the streets of Manhattan, the large phalanx snaked its way toward the United Nations Plaza where speeches by such movement heavyweights as Martin Luther King Jr., David Dellinger, and A.J. Muste were set to commence.²

Barry’s arrival to the antiwar movement, like most VVAWers, marked a journey of personal and political growth. Born in upstate New York, in January 1943, Barry came of age in the nascent stages of the Cold War, absorbing the staunch culture of patriotism typical of the era. As a young boy he dreamed of attending West Point, the nation’s elite military college. Unable to acquire the necessary nomination for acceptance, he enrolled at Syracuse University before enlisting in the Army in the spring of 1962. In less than a year he received his orders to Vietnam where he worked as a radio technician in the Army’s 18th Aviation Company.³ Referring to his days in Vietnam as a “nine-to-five war,” the absurdities of American intervention were made quickly apparent. “After a while it became clear that there was a pattern here. Our people, including the Special Forces, used to stop at four-thirty and have a happy hour and get drunk. There was no war after four-thirty,” he recalled. The bizarre nature of U.S. combat, coupled with his interactions with the Vietnamese people, led Barry to conclude that “*we* were the war.” “If we wanted to go out and chase people around and shoot at them and get them to shoot back at us,

¹ Wells, *War Within*, 132-133.

² Barry, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 195.

³ *Ibid.*, 28-30, 88.

we had a war going on. If we didn't do that, they left us alone," he later explained.⁴ After ten months in Vietnam, Barry received notice of his selection to begin preparatory school for West Point and returned home. Disillusioned with the Army he dropped out after a year and finished the remainder of his enlistment at Fort Rucker, Alabama, before moving back to the East Coast in the spring of 1965.⁵

Despite his budding antiwar sentiments, two years passed before Barry attended his first demonstration — the April Spring Mobilization. An advertisement in the *New York Times Book Review* from the Veterans for Peace in Vietnam requesting the presence of veterans at the rally finally convinced him to break out of his shell.⁶ Years later he remembered the event fondly. "When we proceeded out of the park and down through Fifth Avenue and through the various other streets, people were ready to lynch, howling and screaming and throwing things." But as the tiny contingent of clean-cut men bearing the sign "Vietnam Veterans Against the War" marched past, caustic threats turned to incredulous gasps. "You literally could feel and hear a change in these sidewalk crowds," he remembered.⁷ Upon reaching the Plaza the small party of vets disbanded. The experience exhilarated Barry and sowed in him the budding idea of establishing a group of antiwar Vietnam veterans.

Finding and organizing Vietnam veterans portended to be a daunting task. Historically speaking, antiwar activism on the part of veterans proved an anomaly. There had been cases of veterans' resistance in the past, such as the ex-Continental Army soldiers in Shay's Rebellion in 1786 and the jobless World War I combatants who made up the 1932 Bonus Army. Demographically, African-American vets have been notably rebellious. Denied the rights and

⁴ Jan Barry, interview, in Al Santoli, ed., *Everything We Had: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Thirty-Three American Soldiers Who Fought It* (New York: Random House, 1981), 5.

⁵ Jan Barry, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 91-94.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 194-195.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

freedoms they risked their lives fighting for, black soldiers returned home after the First and Second World Wars with a heightened sense of anger and frustration.⁸ But these were exceptions, not the rule. More typical were the conservative, prowar veterans with memberships to the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars who on October 30, 1965, sponsored a march down Fifth Avenue in New York City in support of the war. It attracted over twenty thousand participants and the approval of President Lyndon Johnson who hoped the demonstration would inspire more rallies of this kind.⁹

In 1967, cases of GI resistance were equally rare. A few instances of antiwar activity festered in the Armed Forces — Lieutenant Henry H. Howe's court-martial for attending an antiwar rally (1965), the publication of Master Sgt. Donald Duncan's article, "The Whole Thing Was a Lie!" in *Ramparts* (1966), and the refusal of the "Fort Hood Three" to accept their orders to Vietnam (1966) — but these were isolated incidents, a prelude to the explosion of insubordination that came later in the decade.¹⁰ Until then, Barry scoured the country looking for potential members. It was an exhausting, often fruitless, job with no patented route for success. "[We] just started reaching out," he said, regarding the early recruitment process. "If anybody'd heard of a Vietnam veteran, or if we saw somebody interviewed in the newspaper, we would track the guy down. Piece by piece we put together a national network, consisting of a very small number of people."¹¹

⁸ Stephen R. Ortiz, *Beyond the Bonus March and GI Bill: How Veteran Politics Shaped the New Deal Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Paul Dickson and Thomas B. Allen, *The Bonus Army: An American Epic* (New York: Walker & Company, 2004); Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt*, 148-151; Herman Graham III, *The Brothers' Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood, and the Military Experience* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003), 1-14.

⁹ Hunt, *Turning*, 7.

¹⁰ Donald Duncan, "The Whole Thing Was A Lie!" *Ramparts*, February 1966, 13-24; Halstead, *Out Now*, 174-184.

¹¹ As quoted in Wells, *War Within*, 141.

VVAW's official founding came on June 1, 1967. An inauspicious event, it consisted of Barry and five other veterans meeting in a crowded New York City apartment. From there the organization grew slowly, finally catching a break with the acquisition of Carl Rogers, a young energetic activist who greatly enhanced VVAW's visibility in the larger peace movement. Smart and personable, Rogers grew up a devout Christian in a small conservative town in Ohio where he enjoyed a comfortable life. Popular with the ladies, he starred in his high school's production of *Oklahoma!*, and won awards for his talents as a square dance caller. Drafted into the Army in 1965, he went to Vietnam as a chaplain's assistance with the Army's 1st Logistical Command in Cam Ranh Bay, and later to the more dangerous area of Phang Rang.¹² On one visit to the field he confronted a dead NLF (National Liberation Front) soldier whose ears had been severed and passed around as souvenirs. Such brutality stirred Rogers's conscience. A faithful patriot, he nevertheless maintained a questioning spirit.¹³ On his last day in Vietnam, while waiting for his return flight home, he wrestled with his budding antiwar convictions. "I kept thinking, What can *I* do, one unimportant person?" he recalled. "People are always saying, 'Forget it — you can't buck the Army; you can't change the world; take care of *yourself*.' Well, maybe I couldn't accomplish anything," he conceded. "But if I never tried, I'd never know. And I had to find out."¹⁴

Arriving home in May 1967, Rogers joined Negotiations Now!, a newly formed middle-of-the-road peace group led by a prestigious group of liberals, including former Kennedy advisor Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., economist John Kenneth Galbraith, and union leader Victor Reuther. Rogers served as its public relations officer, building high-profile contacts, before meeting Barry who sought out the sprightly, young organizer. Attracted to the idea of an all-veterans antiwar

¹² Nicosia, *Home to War*, 19-21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

¹⁴ "Viet-Nam Veteran Speaks Out: Carl Rogers," n.d. (early 1968), in author's possession.

group, he promptly joined using his sharp intellect and savvy PR skills to broaden VVAW's profile and bolster its activism. He became the group's first vice president. Other early joiners were Art Blank and John Talbott, psychiatrists who served in Vietnam, David Braum, an ex-helicopter crew chief, and "about half-a-dozen" Columbia graduate students.¹⁵ Sheldon Ramsdell, a former Navy photographer previously stationed on an aircraft carrier conducting "border reconnaissance bombing" off the coast of Vietnam in 1958, developed into another important contributor. A self-described "conservative Republican who happened to be opposed to the war," his identity was no more contradictory than other members, most of who sprang from conservative backgrounds themselves.¹⁶ Ramsdell first encountered VVAW at a draft card burning in New York City's Union Square in the summer of 1967. After overcoming his initial incredulity of there being such a thing as a Vietnam veterans' antiwar group, he joined the fledgling organization, telling Rogers: "Jesus, I've been looking for you. I've been pissed off at Johnson and all this bullshit — the lying, the deception. This war should have been won long ago."¹⁷

Ramsdell never evolved into the type of left-wing radical typically associated with the sixties; most veterans never did. Early VVAWers usually expressed apprehension about the increasing radicalism shown by the antiwar movement in terms of its politics and strategies. They aimed to be a voice of reason and fight against stringent ideology. "I don't want radical change," proclaimed Braum. "I'm against all political extremes, because they don't leave you a back door to walk out of." Braum's reticent attitude initially kept him from the peace movement.

¹⁵ Nicosia, *Home to War*, 19; SAC, NY (100-160644), "Vietnam Veterans Against the War," October 20, 1967, 1, FBI File No. 100-HQ-448092: PSM Folder No. [12], Reel: 1, Freedom of Information Act. (Hereafter cited as "FOIA").

¹⁶ Hunt, *The Turning*, 20. VVAW, it should be noted, took a very broad approach to its definition of what constituted a Vietnam veteran. Since American involvement in Vietnam predated the 1960s, VVAWers extended their membership to those veterans who served before the massive deployment of U.S. troops under President Lyndon Johnson in 1965.

¹⁷ Sheldon Ramsdell, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 200.

Had it not been for his interactions with “responsible, intelligent, hardworking Americans who don’t want this war” he might never have joined.¹⁸ Others, like Barry, were more critical, but still no more willing to join hands with the radicals. As he expressed: “I don’t have a political line because I don’t think it works. That’s the trouble with the peace movement. What seems to be the cement in the peace movement is the radical left, but the radical left also sets up barriers between the movement and other people.”¹⁹ In striving to remove these barriers, VVAWers articulated their antiwar position through appeals to patriotism, as voiced in the group’s opening credo, co-written by Barry:

We are veterans of the Viet-Nam war. We believe in the United States of America, its Constitution and laws. We stand ready to defend our nation against its enemies, foreign and domestic. We believe in freedom to speak, to think, to change our mind and to dissent. We believe in democracy. We do not believe our country should be supported ‘right or wrong,’ but rather that it is our democratic duty to challenge government policies when we conscientiously believe them to be wrong. We believe that the conflict in which the United States is engaged in Viet-Nam is wrong, unjustifiable and contrary to the principles on which this country was founded. We join the dissent of millions of Americans against this war. We support our buddies still in Viet-Nam. We want them home alive. We want to prevent any other young men from being sent to Viet-Nam. We want an end to the war now. We believe that this is the highest patriotism.²⁰

Appeals to patriotism were common among American activists. In the postwar period, dissidents on the Left and Right invoked patriotic imagery, key historical events, the legacies of past presidents, and the nation’s founding documents to justify a myriad of causes. Even members of the beleaguered Communist Party expressed admiration for leaders like Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, holding them alongside Karl Marx and Eugene Debs as great intellectual leaders.²¹ More motivating for VVAW was the country’s decidedly non-radical

¹⁸ Bell Gale Chevigny, “Farewell to Arms: ‘Over There’ Is Here,” *Village Voice*, March 14, 1968, 22, 56.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁰ Jan Crumb, “Viet Veterans Organize,” *Veterans Stars & Stripes for Peace*, September 1967, 2.

²¹ Hall, *American Patriotism, American Protest*; Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer*, 2.

outlook in the late 1960s. Popular images of revolution aside, most Americans remained unreceptive to the radical posturing of sixties activists. As one cultural rebel later lamented, “The sixties have a reputation for being open and free and cool, but the reality was that everybody was straight.”²² Estranged from the new youth culture’s fashions, symbols, and mores, representatives of “straight” society held to the familiarity of the era’s Cold War culture, looking at the conflict in Vietnam with concern and trepidation. Sometimes this fear took on an apocalyptic tone. Wrote one woman in defense of war: “If we don’t begin today and this very minute, the whole world will one day feel the wrath of the Communist whip.” Memories of World War II and the rise of Nazi Germany often provoked such anxieties. “[There are] direct parallels between the appeasers of the 1930s and the ‘Doves’ of today,” warned a Bronx native. The only prescription, he maintained, was “to apply maximum power — short of atomic weapons — to bring the war to an end.” Protesters working to prevent this were, in his view, committing “as great an act of direct treason against this country as that of anyone in history.”²³ In July 1967, such opinions still reflected the majority. Though on the decline, a Gallup poll found that 48 percent of Americans supported the war, while 41 percent opposed it.²⁴

Early VVAWers by and large shared this aversion to extreme radicalism, but differed from mainstream doves in their level of disillusionment and willingness to engage in bolder acts of protest as a result of their wartime experiences. Vietnam had altered their consciousness,

²² Ronnie Cutrone, interview, in Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, eds., *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk*, 10th ann. ed. (New York: Grove Press, 2006), 14.

²³ Mrs. G.D. to Dr. Benjamin Spock, February 13, 1968, and G.R. [male] to Dr. Spock October 9, 1967, in Michael S. Foley, ed. *Dear Dr. Spock: Letters about the Vietnam War to America’s Favorite Baby Doctor* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 74, 79, 81.

²⁴ Mark Gillespie, “Americans Look Back at Vietnam War,” *Gallup*, November 17, 2000, <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/2299/americans-look-back-vietnam-war.aspx>> (accessed 31 October 2012). Support for war the effort fluctuated between 1965 and 1967, with a majority of the country approving of Johnson’s decision to send troops to fight in Vietnam. In late 1967, the two sides grew closer together in parity, with those opposed to the war finally out gaining its supporters at a steady rate in late February 1968, in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive. See *ibid* for specific statistics.

explained Barry, revealing to them what he called the “raw edges of the whole American dream.”²⁵ In the summer, the group made antiwar activism a top priority. Working primarily in the New York City area, Barry, Rogers, and the others picketed President Lyndon Johnson’s visits to the city, sent speakers to a July 4th veterans’ demonstration in Philadelphia, backed a petition for a referendum on the war, took part in a commemoration ceremony in remembrance of the bombing of Hiroshima, and held numerous speaking engagements, often debating prowar enthusiasts on radio and college campuses. In the fall, VVAWer Francis Rocks joined a Women Strike for Peace demonstration in Washington, D.C., where the former communications sergeant was arrested and “brutally assaulted” by local police. Undeterred, members in October joined a crowd of more than 100,000 demonstrators in the nation’s capital for an event dubbed “Confront the Warmakers,” and followed it up the next month with a Veterans Day protest in Union Square. Braum spoke at the November rally, co-sponsored by the Veterans for Peace in Vietnam, as fellow members dressed in suits and ties carried signs reading: “Vietnam Veterans Demand Bring Our Buddies Home Now!”²⁶

To accompany the Veterans Day demonstration, Barry worked behind the scenes to place a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times*, signed by sixty-five Vietnam veterans, demanding immediate military withdrawal. After countless hours, his exhaustive search for veterans willing to sign a public antiwar declaration bore fruit, and with financial assistance from the Veterans for Peace, was able to secure its publication. Curiously, perhaps fearing political backlash, the *Times* delayed the ad by more than a week, publishing it on November 19. Leading with the headline “VIET-NAM VETERANS SPEAK OUT,” Barry pulled no punches, calling

²⁵ Chevigny, “Farewell to Arms,” 56.

²⁶ SAC, New York (100-160644), “Vietnam Veterans Against the War,” 3-7; Crumb, “Viet Veterans Organize,” 2; “Marchers Confront War Makers at the Pentagon,” *Veterans Stars & Stripes for Peace*, November/December 1967, 1; DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *American Ordeal*, 196-198. See also the photo collage in Stacewicz, *Winter Soldiers*, 199.

the Saigon government “a military dictatorship” and maligning U.S. policy in Southeast Asia as not only “contrary to the principle of self-determination on which this nation was founded,” but one that “supports tyranny and denies democracy.”²⁷ When compared to the coarse rhetoric employed by the growing student Left these statements seem quaint. But given the grip Cold War anxieties continued to have on Americans, the advertisement no doubt ruffled a few feathers, not least because it contained the kind of confrontational parlance antiwar liberals typically advised against.²⁸

In Washington, it did not go unnoticed. The ad incensed Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara and caught the attention of sympathetic doves in Congress.²⁹ The increased exposure drew more interest in the organization from across the country. Once confined to the country’s Northeastern urban centers, by the fall antiwar Vietnam veterans had developed, or were in the process of developing, chapters at the University of Indiana and the University of Texas. Cities like Chicago and Detroit also saw some action as local veterans gathered together in solidarity. By early 1968, VVAW reported activity in such diverse locations as Alabama, California, Ohio, and Oregon.³⁰ For the most part these chapters operated in isolation of one another and kept their activism very traditional. They delivered speeches at universities, churches, and public events; wrote their members of Congress; marched with signs in demonstrations; and publicly recited the names of the war dead.³¹

²⁷ “Viet-Nam Veterans Speak Out,” *New York Times*, November 19, 1967.

²⁸ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *American Ordeal*, 141-202.

²⁹ FBI Agent D.J. Brennan, memorandum to Mr. W.C. Sullivan, “Vietnam Veterans Against the War Internal Security,” November 19, 1967, FBI File No. 100-HQ-448092: PSM Folder No. [12], Reel: 1, FOIA.

³⁰ “History,” n.d. (February-March 1971), Box 1, Folder 3, VVAW Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin. (Hereafter cited as “WSHS”).

³¹ William F. Crandell, “They Moved the Town: Organizing Vietnam Veterans Against the War,” in *Give Peace a Chance: Exploring the Vietnam Antwar Movement*, eds. Melvin Small and William D. Hoover (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 142.

The Tet Offensive, a series of surprise uprisings led by Vietnamese insurgents in the opening months of 1968, delivered more antiwar veterans into the peace movement. General William Westmoreland's characterization of Tet as "a great American victory" seemed particularly egregious considering the number of U.S. soldiers left dead and wounded.³² As former infantry lieutenant William Crandell remembered: "His statement finally convinced me that our commanders lacked any understanding about the war; that we were thus doomed to lose, and that the lives lost would be wasted." With his burgeoning antiwar spirit firmly in tow, Crandell joined VVAW and was anointed its Midwest coordinator. His reasons for doing so were simple: "Like most VVAW members, I had as my strongest motivations to keep faith with the men left in Vietnam and prevent their lives from being thrown away."³³

With men like Crandell trickling into the organization in 1968, VVAW's membership reached between 500 and 600 veterans nationally. Equally significant, it represented "all the armed services and most of the major units stationed in Viet-Nam."³⁴ To keep pace with its growing identity, the veterans established a national headquarters at 156 Fifth Avenue in New York City.³⁵ Yet even as the group grew in size, opening some thirty chapters across the country, its focus remained distinctively grassroots. "This is the year of the local organization and individual," exclaimed a VVAW flyer.³⁶ At a time when the antiwar movement's most visible segments were relying on a strategy of numbers — flooding cities like New York, San Francisco,

³² Statistically, Westmoreland was correct. Despite catching American and South Vietnamese forces off guard, the National Liberation Front/North Vietnam offensive failed to produce the military triumph its strategists intended resulting in massive casualties for the enemy. Still, as historian Lloyd Gardner explains, Tet succeeded as a partial "psychological" victory for the North and its insurgent allies in the way it "raised military questions about American ability to prevail in the war, both in the short term and over the longer haul." Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 427.

³³ *Ibid.*, 142.

³⁴ "History," (1971); "Viet-Nam Vets Organize Against the War," n.d. (1967), Box 1, Folder 3, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

³⁵ Prior to this move, VVAW had office space at 17 East 17th Street in downtown New York.

³⁶ "Facts and Background," n.d. (c. 1968), in author's possession.

and Washington, D.C. with protestors — VVAW balanced its participation in mass demonstrations with its concentration on local activism. “I used to refer to it as ‘working between the waves,’” Jan Barry recalled. In the antiwar movement, “there’s a spring offensive, there’s a fall offensive. But who’s working in between time? That’s where I wanted to concentrate our small numbers of people.” VVAWers agreed with antiwar radicals that democratic power flowed from the bottom up, but they were less optimistic about the influence of mass protest. “I went to so many marches on Washington that they all merge together,” Barry continued. “I never felt like anything substantial happened. Whereas when I went and spoke to a small number of people in a conservative community, you could see instantaneously something happening. People asking more questions, suddenly going from utter contempt to, ‘What? Really? That is what our soldiers are doing over in Vietnam?’”³⁷

To better reach the nation’s grass roots, VVAW tapped into an extensive network of movement organizers at the local level. In a number of cases these were homemakers and professionals — teachers and lawyers — who held the peace movement together in between demonstrations. News of VVAW’s formation naturally piqued their interest and they sent out requests for the antiwar veterans to speak at public events. Within a short time, these invitations had VVAWers going to “Long Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, upstate New York, and outward from there.”³⁸ At these forums, the veterans counseled the audience to learn their history, study the facts, understand the Geneva Accords, and not rely on unsubstantiated rumors and opinions. Such exercises, after all, had been significant to their own antiwar conversions. “I wanted to know what was the background to this group of people we were fighting,” Barry explained. “I needed to understand, what is Marxism? Who is Mao? Who is Ho Chi Minh? What’s that all

³⁷ Barry, interview with author, October 30, 2013.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

about?” Early VVAWers also benefited from their interactions with Old Left figures in the antiwar group Veterans for Peace in Vietnam whose leadership, composed largely of World War II vets, impressed upon Barry the importance of taking protest seriously. “[Professionalism is] more than simply you do it at your job,” he learnt. “If you are going to be an activist, you’ve got to do it in a professional kind of way.”³⁹

While VVAW maintained a working relationship with the larger peace movement, it tended to avoid formal political entanglements with other groups, choosing instead to focus attention on its primary objective: ending the war in Vietnam. This they accomplished with a decidedly open approach to organizing that stressed pragmatic activism over philosophical dogma. “Unlike members of most political organizations, these veterans are held together by no ideology,” observed the *Village Voice*. “They have in common perhaps only their experience of fighting in Vietnam and their decision to fight against the war at home.”⁴⁰ Such flexible parameters provided coherence to an otherwise disparate membership base. Within the New York office alone veterans represented a range of backgrounds. One hailed from nearby Brooklyn. Another came from an Iowa farm. High school drop-outs worked alongside a Sunday school teacher, a painter, and a Harvard graduate.⁴¹ The eclectic pulse of the city contributed to the office’s diversity. Congregating around Greenwich Village, the veterans often met in sidewalk cafés, and attended local bars and parties, to foster greater interaction with other peace advocates in the community. On occasion this included well-known poets, writers, actors, and singers who the veterans met at antiwar functions. “That was another part of the networking,” Barry recalled, “in terms of just reaching the widest imaginable variety of audiences.”⁴²

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Bell Gale Chevigny, “Vietnam: The Worst Years of Our Lives,” *Village Voice*, February 15, 1968, 14.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴² Barry, interview with author, October 30, 2013.

The free-flowing nature of its early meetings reflected the group's general disregard for formal authority and procedure. From the very beginning, VVAW proved extremely decentralized and deliberately set up to avoid replicating the military's hierarchical command structure. Bylaws were written and leadership titles were created, but none of this really mattered, explained Barry, VVAW's first president. "The only titles we had were for the paperwork," he said. "[M]y own sense of organizing was that these guys don't want one person telling them what to do. What they need is a process in which empowerment takes place."⁴³ The process of empowerment began at the local level where veterans ran their chapters without fear of centralized decision-making intruding from above. Respecting this, headquarters worked purposefully to coordinate local activism so its influence could be felt nationally. It did this with the strictest respect for chapter autonomy; promising a policy of "coordination," not "command." "We will assist and advise, and in national actions provide the groundwork forces, but only with the approval of local groups and individuals," assured Francis Rocks, VVAW's secretary-treasurer.⁴⁴

The approach was practical as much as it was philosophical. "[A] veteran — after two years of organization — doesn't want to be a part of any organization again," Vietnam vet Nick Friedman noted. "He doesn't want to subject himself to ideology any more."⁴⁵ VVAWers complained regularly of the military's stifling bureaucratic culture. From basic training forward, soldiers were governed by a strict chain of command designed to foster discipline, obedience, and respect. Expressions of individuality and critical thinking, in the case of taking orders, were

⁴³ Barry, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 197.

⁴⁴ Crumb, "Viet Veterans Organize," 2.

⁴⁵ Chevigny, "Farwell to Arms," 22.

greatly discouraged.⁴⁶ The expectation of deference to authority taxed soldiers, especially those in the field who distrusted their superiors. “I thought the officers would have a clue about what was going on, and it became clear that people were just following orders blindly,” stated Tom Wetzler, a future member of VVAW’s Texas chapter. “I just kept on meeting people who kept on telling me what to do and didn’t want to tell me why, and I had this nasty habit of asking *why* all the time. I found out that they didn’t know why either; and when they didn’t know why, it pissed me off.”⁴⁷ The military’s consolidation of authority in its top-down command structure proved disillusioning to veterans who as civilians became hostile to centralized direction. To accommodate this, VVAW managed itself “more as a coordinating body and a clearinghouse [for information] than as a ‘membership’ organization” concerned with policy debates and issues of resource management.⁴⁸

Contempt for authority and hierarchical decision-making animated much of VVAW’s activism, but in the late 1960s it stressed dialogue and debate over civil disobedience. A deliberate decision was made to appeal to “the uncommitted — the so-called ‘silent center.’” Dressed in suits and ties, members traversed their region’s many college campuses, churches, community centers, and radio stations to debate prowar politicians, soldiers, and military personnel in public forums.⁴⁹ In October 1967 David Braum and Carl Rogers appeared on the *David Susskind Show* for the first nationally televised discussion of Vietnam by veterans who had served there. Earlier that same month, Robert Barnes, a former aviator, represented VVAW at an antiwar “teach-in” organized by students attending New York’s State University College

⁴⁶ For more on military culture during the Vietnam War, see the relevant chapters in Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

⁴⁷ Tom Wetzler, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 107.

⁴⁸ “Viet-Nam Vets Organize Against the War.”

⁴⁹ Barry, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 201-202; “Facts and Background”; “Veterans Voice on Vietnam,” unpublished newspaper, n.d. (1967), Box 1, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

campus in Oneonta. Demanding an end to “this lousy war,” Barnes “forcefully” summarized the organization’s position to the 300 students and Oneonta residents in attendance: “We believe the conflict is wrong, unjust and contrary to the self-determination of the Vietnamese people.”⁵⁰ Combining personal experience with scrupulous research, VVAWers offered penetrating criticisms of U.S. intervention in Vietnam, speaking on a range of topics that included the 1954 Geneva Accords, Gulf of Tonkin Resolutions, military strategy, and troop withdrawal.⁵¹

In leveling their criticisms, VVAWers attacked not simply the war, but more importantly those policy experts responsible for it, calling into question the country’s trust in the judgment of establishment elites. Still, because VVAW lacked a specific ideology, the veterans varied in the intensity of their criticisms. David Braum, more conservative and forgiving than other members, conceded that, “Yes, the military industrial complex is a natural outgrowth of unchecked free enterprise and it’s running rampant. But with the proper control,” he maintained, “it could be a good thing.”⁵² Differences aside, beyond ending the war, all were groping toward a similar, if inchoate, rejection of consolidated power in the postwar liberal state as illustrated by the deliberate obfuscation of facts and information by officials at the highest levels. Braum, himself, gave expression to this feeling in a letter of protest written to Senator J. William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee:

As for myself, I have been struck again and again by repeated acts of bad judgment, by inconsistencies between what is said by the Johnson Administration and what I myself know to be true, and by lies emanating from the Department of State in an organized effort to mislead the Congress and the people. Any one of these acts is inexcusable by a government whose moral and political foundation is an accurately informed citizenry.⁵³

⁵⁰ “Vietnam Vets Debate War,” *Veterans Stars & Stripes for Peace*, October 1967, 2; Steve Pogust, “Sunday Session ‘A Chance to Compare’: ‘Teach-in’ Discloses Majority Opposed to Vietnam War,” *Oneonta Star*, October 9, 1967.

⁵¹ Barry, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 201-202.

⁵² Chevigny, “Farewell to Arms,” 22, 56.

⁵³ David Braum to Senator J.W. Fulbright, December 14, 1967, Box 2, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

In time, such criticisms would lead VVAWers to more piercing attacks against America society. At the moment, though, most members were content to empower the nation's electorate to reclaim control of their government by exposing the truths of Vietnam. The impetus for VVAW's education blitzes thus evolved from its trust in the democratic process. Barry, Rogers, and the others, reared in postwar patriotism, took it for granted that if "you change the public attitude in this country, things change" and "ultimately there would be a change in policy."⁵⁴ Furthermore, they believed their status as Vietnam veterans would arouse a sense of urgency in the public, converting apathy to outrage. In this spirit, VVAWers joined the 1968 "Dump Johnson" campaign, a grassroots movement led by liberal activist Allard Lowenstein to unseat the incumbent, Lyndon Johnson, as the Democratic Party's presidential nominee in the upcoming November election. By running alternative peace candidates against Johnson in the primaries, the loyal insurgency attempted nothing less than "a peaceful coup de'etat" launched from the ground up.⁵⁵ Braving the winter elements, a small cadre of veterans, led by Rogers, ventured to New Hampshire in February to build support for Senator Eugene McCarthy's budding campaign, which had been announced the previous November. Joining with thousands of other volunteers, they took to the streets of Manchester, Concord, Nashua, and Laconia to converse with voters and use the early presidential primary as a way of mobilizing mass opposition to Johnson's candidature.⁵⁶

Always willing to work through established institutions and use his personal appeal to connect with understanding doves in Washington, Rogers believed this to be a logical step in VVAW's evolution. McCarthy's candidacy intrigued Rogers who saw in the Minnesotan a real

⁵⁴ Barry, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 201.

⁵⁵ William H. Chafe, *Never Stop Running: Allard Lowenstein and the Struggle to Save American Liberalism* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 262.

⁵⁶ William J. Cardoso, "Veterans Backing McCarthy in N.H.," *Boston Globe*, March 10, 1968.

chance to end the war. The two met briefly in January 1968 at a New Democratic Coalition convention in Miami, Florida, where Rogers had been invited to speak. Impressed, McCarthy's associates approached the young veteran about working for the senator's campaign as a "second speaker" in New Hampshire.⁵⁷ He agreed, and with the primary fast approaching enlisted fellow VVAWers in creating the *ad hoc* group, "Viet-Nam Veterans for McCarthy." "Our job," explained John Durant, an ex-helicopter crew chief and one of Rogers's recruits, "was to walk before shopping centers and the like with a sign reading: 'I'm a Vietnam veteran. I'm for McCarthy. Ask me why.'"⁵⁸ They also published an advertisement endorsing the senator as "the man most able to lead the country out of war in Viet-Nam and to unite the country to meet the challenges at home." Over one hundred Vietnam-era veterans signed the ad; all of them "awarded medals by the United States Government for their service in Vietnam." Included on the list were Rogers, Barry, Ramsdell, and Braum.⁵⁹

Campaigning for McCarthy developed into a full-time job. Ramsdell, who volunteered in New Hampshire at Rogers's request, soon found himself working as McCarthy's press agent for the duration of the campaign. "I worked all the primaries, traveled with him, flew everywhere with him," he recalled.⁶⁰ Similarly, VVAWer Mike McCusker, a former Marine sergeant, joined McCarthy's staff and went to Los Angeles, a key battleground state, to drum up support.⁶¹ With the veterans devoting such energy to the Democratic primaries, Viet-Nam Veterans for McCarthy nearly eclipsed VVAW as the veterans' primary vehicle for antiwar activism in 1968. The transition proved natural. Upon seeing McCarthy's success "a whole bunch of people in

⁵⁷ Nicosia, *Home to War*, 28.

⁵⁸ John Durant is a pseudonym. He is quoted in Murray Polner, *No Victory Parades: The Return of the Vietnam Veteran* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 60.

⁵⁹ "Viet-Nam Veterans Speak Out," Viet-Nam Veterans for McCarthy advertisement, Box 8, Folder 9, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁶⁰ Ramsdell, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 204.

⁶¹ Hunt, *Turning*, 25.

VVAW said that's what I want to do. I want to work on a campaign that looks like it's going to go someplace," Barry later explained.⁶² Very quickly, the national office closed its doors to focus exclusively with McCarthy. Rogers embraced the change. "It is clear that there's not much more that can be done in the streets, especially by us," he wrote in a memo to the New York office, "but as an organization we can have an enormous effect — man to man — on the minds of the uncommitted in this years election.... [O]ur abilities and experience can do more than educate. They can motivate!"⁶³

True to the organization's antiauthoritarian structure, though, no effort was made to force members to accept McCarthy's candidacy. Some later threw their support behind Robert Kennedy, creating the Vietnam Veterans for Kennedy. At least one campaigned on behalf of Fred Halstead, the Socialist Workers Party's presidential candidate. Another expressed interest in thumping for George Wallace and the American Independent Party, to which Jan Barry responded: "Well, whatever you want to do. This is what it's all about."⁶⁴ Still others rejected traditional political channels altogether. Although most members were moderates, VVAW housed more rebellious-types as well — individuals who eschewed working in mainstream institutions like the Democratic Party. Case in point: Jeff Sharlet. Sharlet joined VVAW in the summer of 1967. Trained as an Army "translator-interpreter," he was stationed in Saigon in 1963 before his relocation north, near Phu Bai, to work with a "top-secret" unit of code breakers, intercepting and translating radio messages from North Vietnam. Fluent in Vietnamese, Sharlet regularly conversed with local peasants about the developing conflict, and by the time of his departure in July 1964 had developed deep misgivings about U.S. military involvement in

⁶² Barry, interview with author, October 30, 2013.

⁶³ Quoted in Nicosia, *Home to War*, 28.

⁶⁴ Barry, interview with author, October 30, 2013; Daniel E. Cleghorn, background questionnaire, n.d. (1968); Robert Wilkinson, background questionnaire, n.d. (1968), in author's possession.

Southeast Asia.⁶⁵ Upon returning home, Sharlet enrolled at Indiana University where he became chairman of the local SDS chapter. His tenure in the group proved active but ultimately short-lived.⁶⁶ Though sympathetic to the New Left generation, “he did not overly identify” with its politics, stated his brother and biographer, Robert Sharlet. An “independent radical,” he operated as “a very focused pragmatist rather than an ideologue of any persuasion.”⁶⁷

Convinced more needed to be done to organize GIs against the war, Sharlet moved to Chicago where instead of pursuing graduate work he used the money accrued from his prestigious Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to begin publishing one of the first antiwar newspapers directed to servicemen: *Vietnam GI*. With a thriving readership reaching into the tens of thousands, monthly copies of *Vietnam GI* were distributed en masse to servicemen at bus stations and military induction centers. Most impressive was its mailing list of 3,000 GIs stationed in Vietnam.⁶⁸ Early VVAWers played a supportive role in the paper’s development as volunteer staffers and contributing editors. VVAW co-founders Jan Barry and Francis Rocks each lent their names to the publication’s “Vietnam Veteran Advisory Committee.”⁶⁹ With both a stateside and overseas edition, *Vietnam GI* proved indispensable in fostering an antiwar culture in the armed services which Sharlet saw as the most effective way of bringing the war to an end. His main strategy after leaving SDS looked to “relentlessly strike at the Achilles heel of the military

⁶⁵ “Jeff Sharlet Dies,” *Vietnam GI*, August 1969, 3.

⁶⁶ For more on Sharlet’s time in SDS, see Mary Ann Wynkoop, *Dissent in the Heartland: The Sixties at Indiana University* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 36, 42-44, 46, 51.

⁶⁷ Robert Sharlet to author, March 6, 2013. Robert Sharlet, a political scientist, is currently researching and writing a biography of his brother with his son, Jeff Sharlet, a journalist and academic, whose namesake he shares with the subject. The project has yet to be published, but anecdotal details regarding the life and times of Jeff Sharlet can be found on Robert’s blog, *Searching for Jeff* <jeffsharletandvietnamgi.blogspot.com/> (accessed 6 March 2013).

⁶⁸ “Jeff Sharlet Dies,” 3; Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt*, 55.

⁶⁸ Robert Sharlet to author, March 6, 2013.

⁶⁹ Jan Barry, “Vietnam GI Challenged War Makers,” *EarthAirWater*, May 31, 2011 <<http://earthairwater.blogspot.ca/2011/05/vietnam-gi-challenged-war-makers.html>> (accessed March 8, 2013). Courtesy Robert Sharlet.

machine in Nam” by “raising GI political awareness about the war.” This, he hoped, would lead to a virtual breakdown in the military, making the war impossible to fight.⁷⁰

In these efforts, Sharlet forged a position between antiwar street radicals on the Left and mainstream party advocates in the center. Whenever a *Vietnam GI* staff writer attempted to “Marxify the language and spin of the paper, Jeff would scotch it,” his brother explained. “He was determined to write the paper in the argot of the GI, the vast majority of whom where hardly into explicit class analysis.”⁷¹ A pragmatist first and foremost, Sharlet concentrated his efforts on “concrete action” opposed to “symbolic acts” like getting arrested, a strategy he saw as unnecessary and counterproductive.⁷² Such apprehensions were directed just as pointedly toward the electoral process. When Senator Robert Kennedy announced his candidacy for president in mid-March, bolstering the Dump Johnson movement, *Vietnam GI* reminded its readers that “neither [McCarthy nor Kennedy] has been willing to commit himself to simply getting out of the Vietnam War.”⁷³ In a later issue, closer to the November election, Sharlet cautioned against placing too much faith in the postwar liberal state which he saw as the problem, not the solution. “Liberalism has run this country for thirty-five years of New Deals, Fair Deals, New Frontiers, and Great Societies.” And yet, the paper editorialized,

America is falling apart because more and more people have had it. They’re fed up with a system where they don’t have control of the government, where they spend most of their lives just taking orders — in school, in the services and at work. The system may be all right for politicians and executives, but for millions of ordinary people it just hasn’t worked.⁷⁴

Real change came not through the ballot box, *Vietnam GI* maintained, but through sustained, pragmatic protest by soldiers. “[W]e’ve got to force the Government to end the war,” its editors

⁷⁰ Sharlet to author, March 8, 2013.

⁷¹ Sharlet to author, March 6, 2013.

⁷² Sharlet to author, March 8, 2013.

⁷³ “Keep On the Heat,” *Vietnam GI*, May 1968, 4.

⁷⁴ “Where It’s At!” *Vietnam GI* (Stateside Edition), September 1968, 3.

implored. “It’s our job to keep the Brass from carrying out their half-baked plans for Vietnam, home, or anywhere. Every time we do this we’re that much closer to ending the war and getting down to the business of changing the system at home.”⁷⁵

It is important, however, not to differentiate too strongly between radicals and liberals in VVAW. Sharlet’s politics on the Left shared much with members like Barry and Rogers who saw in the Dump Johnson campaign an opportunity to carve out a dissident position between moderates and radicals. The Democratic Party was, after all, contested terrain in 1968. Establishment liberals who controlled the party suddenly found themselves on the defensive. Pressure was mounting from inside and outside its ranks to end the war in Vietnam and loosen the party’s hierarchy to permit greater democratic participation from below. From the inside, activist liberals, led by Allard Lowenstein, and antiwar veterans worked through the Dump Johnson campaign to make primaries more responsive to local voters and undercut the power of party bosses. Its strategy was defiant yet loyal. It was, to quote Lowenstein’s biographer, “an insurgent movement that pledged to accomplish radical ends through reformist means.”⁷⁶ For those who wanted change but not revolution, the approach proved alluring. Its efforts to wrestle political power away from establishment elites through grassroots mobilization in local primaries was deceptively subversive, sharing much with earlier campaigns like Upton Sinclair’s End Poverty in California Movement (1934) and SNCC’s Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (1964) in its attempt at turning the Democrats into a genuine “people’s party.”

Ultimately, the Dump Johnson movement succeeded in helping to depose its target from the Democratic ticket, but failed to install an antiwar alternative in his place. When the votes were finally tallied in New Hampshire on March 12, Senator McCarthy came within 230 of

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁶ Chafe, *Never Stop Running*, 262.

defeating the president's write-in campaign. Less than a month later, the Minnesotan looked poised for victory in Wisconsin. With such a humiliating loss pending, and the recent entry of his archrival, Bobby Kennedy, into the primaries, Johnson declined re-nomination on March 31, 1968, in a national televised address. The president's decision was treated as a victory by the peace movement. Suddenly, the chance of electing a dove to the White House became a viable reality. Or so they thought. Just as the Dump Johnson activists were beginning to yield results, the party establishment dug in its heels. In early April, Hubert Humphrey, Johnson's vice president, announced his candidacy. A long-standing Democrat, Humphrey had deep connections to the party machine. After only a few weeks of backroom brokering he acquired roughly 900 of the necessary 1,300 delegates needed to secure the party's nomination. His support among traditional Democrats and promises of peace without "humiliation or defeat" worried antiwar activists who saw in the vice president a carbon copy of their nemesis, Johnson.⁷⁷

With Humphrey now the clear frontrunner, antiwar activists searched for ways of preventing the inevitable. The tragic assassination of Senator Kennedy on June 5 led some, like SDS leader Tom Hayden, to intensify their efforts for radical change on the grounds that their "analysis of society did not go far enough" and that "it was time to take [their] turn in the line of people who would probably be repressed, brutalized or killed."⁷⁸ VVAWers, by contrast, chose a different route, joining Lowenstein and others from the Dump Johnson movement to create the Coalition for an Open Convention (COC) — an alliance of McCarthy supporters and former Kennedy backers to prevent the selection of Humphrey at the national convention in Chicago. Democratic committees in states like Pennsylvania, New York, Connecticut, and Indiana were

⁷⁷ Anderson, *Movement and the Sixties*, 204.

⁷⁸ Gitlin, *Sixties*, 311.

refusing to send a single McCarthy delegate to the convention, irrespective of the hundreds of thousands of votes cast for him their primaries.⁷⁹ Rogers believed Vietnam veterans could play a pivotal role in correcting this and created a “Viet-Nam Veterans Committee” within the COC.

Barry joined Rogers in forming the committee. Their dedication to transparency reflected VVAW’s belief that political decisions should be arrived at through vigorous debate in open forums of competing ideas, not in smoke-filled chambers by party strategists. Most VVAWers, even those who cautioned against militant displays of radicalism, shared the New Left’s hostility to elitism. The idea that individuals were capable of making important decisions on their own, free of top-down interference, is what drove so many veterans to Senator McCarthy’s grassroots campaign in the primaries. The community-based methods of state-by-state organizing appealed to VVAW’s antistatist preference for greater community control and democratic localism. They brought this same style and energy with them to the Coalition for an Open Convention. To “dramatize” their goals, veterans traveled in teams to key states to “recruit other veterans and generate support...through exposure on radio, TV, and in the press.” They also participated in public hearings, town hall meetings, and planned a letter-writing campaign to influence the delegates.⁸⁰ Personal testimonies were their strongest asset. To capitalize on them, they created a print-advertisement comparing the “small feudal aristocracy” buttressing the government in Saigon to the various elite-run State Democratic Committees refusing to send McCarthy delegates to Chicago. It concluded with an appeal for additional Vietnam veterans to join with

⁷⁹ “A Viet-Nam Veterans Asks: Where is the Democracy I Fought to Preserve?,” n.d. (c. June 1968), Box 8, Folder 9, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁸⁰ Carl Rogers, Jan Barry, and Robert Bradley Kennedy, “Vietnam Veterans Proposal to the Continuations Committee of the Coalition for an Open Convention,” June 1968, Box 8, Folder, 9, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

them in lobbying for an open convention, stating: “Let’s have these men who were sent 10,000 miles away ‘to preserve democracy’ in Viet-Nam see that it’s preserved at home first.”⁸¹

A group of fifty antiwar veterans representing the COC went to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Rogers and Ramsdell were each present. Conspicuously absent, however, were Barry and Sharlet. Barry, burnt out from organizing, opted to stay on the East Coast sensing it would be “a bad situation,” while Sharlet, who lived in Chicago, took shelter in San Francisco on the chance that authorities might “use [the event] as a cover for harassment” to undermine *Vietnam GI*.⁸² Their apprehensions proved prescient. The convention opened on Monday, August 26, but activists started to arrive in Chicago over the weekend. Mayor Richard Daley, a Democratic Party stalwart, vowed to not let demonstrators disturb the proceedings, and employed a small army of 12,000 police officers and 6,000 National Guardsmen to keep order.⁸³ In the weeks leading up to the convention, Daley worked to deter potential protestors by denying demonstration permits and publicizing heavy-handed plans for keeping the Windy City safe from “extremists.” In all, only 5,000 activists braved the threats and made their way to Chicago, joining a like number of protesters already in the city.⁸⁴

Unlike Barry and Sharlet, the contingent of veterans that arrived in Chicago appeared less anxious. Drawing on Rogers’s connections with Lowenstein and the COC, they planned to lobby delegates as they arrived at the International Amphitheatre with the aim of persuading them to adopt an antiwar platform and nominate Senator McCarthy. Their efforts fell short. The platform committee rejected the antiwar proposal, supporting instead a statement reaffirming President Johnson’s position on Vietnam. After vigorous debate, the convention adopted the prowar plank

⁸¹ “Where is the Democracy I Fought to Preserve?”

⁸² Barry, interview with author, October 30, 2013; Sharlet, to the author, March 8, 2013.

⁸³ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *American Ordeal*, 226.

⁸⁴ Wells, *War Within*, 276-277.

by a vote of 1,567³/₄ to 1,041¹/₄. The final blow came on August 28 when Humphrey officially accepted his party's nomination for president.⁸⁵ Later that night, outside the convention auditorium, the situation deteriorated as Mayor Daley unleashed a concert of police officers, undercover federal agents, and National Guardsmen on the demonstrators in the downtown core holding their own mock "People's Convention."⁸⁶ All week activists battled police brutality with the veterans doing their best to avoid such abuse. Finally, on the convention's final night, they found themselves swept up in the confusion as authorities charged into the streets attacking demonstrators indiscriminately. "[I]t was an atrocity," Ramsdell remembered. "Everybody was beaten up. We were teargassed. The rooms were raided. We were totally disenfranchised."⁸⁷

Television cameras captured the violence and broadcasted it to the nation. The images unsettled activists and liberals who watched in horror, wondering to themselves what was happening to their country. Conservatives responded with greater buoyancy, lauding the violent crackdown on 10,000 unarmed demonstrators as "admirable." In the convention hall, select delegates criticized Daley's "Gestapo" tactics and compared his siege to the concurrent repression of Czech reformers in Prague by Soviet forces.⁸⁸ Vietnam veterans in attendance drew more personal connections, citing eerie similarities to their wartime experiences. For John Durant, the former helicopter crew chief who campaigned for McCarthy in New Hampshire, the sounds of shouting and screaming on the streets, and helicopters patrolling overhead, were unnerving. "Seeing those guys up above, looking at the troops and cops, and knowing they were against me — for me this was as terrifying as anything in Vietnam," he confessed. Holding back

⁸⁵ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *American Ordeal*, 227-228.

⁸⁶ Anderson, *Movement*, 216-218.

⁸⁷ Ramsdell, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 204.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 224-225; DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *American Ordeal*, 228.

tears, he bought a bus ticket home the next morning, thinking to himself: “All that hate and beating and gas was too much, twice in one brief life.”⁸⁹

The November elections arrived unabated. Republican challenger, Richard Nixon, won in a tightly fought race, edging out Hubert Humphrey and third-party candidate George Wallace. By the time of the election VVAW had retreated into a state of minimal activity. In the weeks following the August convention Jan Barry and Carl Rogers called a meeting of VVAW in New York City, but no one showed up. “After McCarthy, I was burned out and didn’t want to be involved in any politics,” Sheldon Ramsdell remembered. Membership in general lagged. “A lot of people dropped out,” said Barry. “It [the organization] disappeared altogether for a while.”⁹⁰ With such palpable exhaustion consuming the East Coast chapters, national coordinating responsibilities were handed over to Jim Boggio, the West Coast coordinator in Los Angeles. Boggio had worked with Rogers and Barry as a member of the COC’s Viet-Nam Veterans Committee. In the proceeding months, however, he set his sights on more radical alternatives to change, asking those still remaining in the organization “to join with me in revolution.”⁹¹ Completely isolated from the rest of VVAW, Boggio’s plea went largely unanswered outside the handful of active members in the L.A. area who followed him in creating the short-lived GI’s and Vietnam Veterans Against the War — an offshoot of VVAW later believed to be infiltrated by members of the Young Socialist Alliance.⁹²

⁸⁹ Polner, *No Victory Parades*, 46, 47.

⁹⁰ Barry, interview, and Ramsdell, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 204.

⁹¹ Carl Rogers, letter to VVAW members, November 3, 1968, Box 7, Folder 37, VVAW Papers, WSHS; SAC, Los Angeles (100-new), Memorandum to Director, FBI, November 11, 1968, 2, FBI File No. 100-HQ-451697, PSM Folder No. [88], Reel: 21, FOIA.

⁹² For an organizational summary of GI’s and Vietnam Veterans Against the War and its activism, see SAC, FBI File, Los Angeles (100-451697), “Communist, Infiltration, GI’s and Vietnam Veterans Against the War,” August, 18, 1969, 1-21, FBI File No. 100-HQ-451697, PSM Folder No. [88], Reel: 21, FOIA.

Political activity among Vietnam veterans did not cease completely on the East Coast. As the GI movement grew stronger in late 1968 Rogers formed LINK with plans “to bring the peace movement and servicemen in closer touch.” VVAWers like Barry and Stephen Wilcox lent their services to Rogers’s new upstart, aiding in its dual task of providing legal assistance to GIs “under attack by the brass” and opening overseas coffeehouses in Southeast Asia for soldiers on their R&R.⁹³ The latter aim was not incidental. Around the time Rogers formed LINK the GI coffeehouse movement had taken root. Beginning in early 1968, antiwar veterans and civilians worked together to establish local storefronts near military bases as hip alternatives to the traditional barracks where questioning soldiers could go and read antiwar literature, listen to rock and roll music, and chat openly about Vietnam with recently returned vets.⁹⁴ Rogers’s plan of establishing coffeehouses in Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Bangkok proved bold, but with no more than one hundred members and limited cash, LINK folded after a year, not long after the untimely death of Jeff Sharlet, whose short battle with cancer ended on June 16, 1969. Without a project to call his own, Rogers went to work for the well-established Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam (CALCAV) where he married his Christian faith and antiwar convictions.⁹⁵ With Sharlet dead and Rogers gone, VVAW lost two of its most dynamic leaders.

In the days of uncertainty following the Chicago convention and leadership shake-ups in the national office, VVAW found itself at a crossroads. A year earlier David Braum told a reporter, “I can’t approve of civil disobedience until every possible legal means has been exhausted. I prefer to work within the system to vote out people who can’t work with reality and elect those who can.”⁹⁶ After Chicago, the organization started to reevaluate its faith in reform.

⁹³ Rogers, letter to VVAW members, November 3, 1968, WSHS.

⁹⁴ Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt*, 53.

⁹⁵ “Jeff Sharlet Dies,” 3; Nicosia, *Home to War*, 48; Hunt, *Turning*, 224 n.58.

⁹⁶ Chevigny, “Farewell to Arms,” 56.

Some members, following Sharlet's lead, had jettisoned their confidence in party politics well in advance of the August siege. Most held to the view that Vietnam could be corrected through the legislative process, leading them to seek partnerships with progressive Democrats who shared with them a theory of change premised on their mutual trust in the responsiveness of established institutions. Still, it would be a mistake to dismiss the period 1967-1968 as an era of moderation. Such a descriptor negates the complexities of VVAW's early activism. The grassroots struggles of the Dump Johnson movement and the Coalition for an Open Convention were direct attacks on the kinds of top-down power hierarchies found in the Democratic Party specifically and American politics more generally. These efforts, along with VVAW's relentless criticisms of policy experts and anarchic organizing patterns, were indicative of its rejection of the postwar liberal state's reliance on managerial elitism at the expense of populist democracy. Nuances aside, neither "moderates" nor "radicals" in VVAW were satisfied with the status quo. Both were searching for ways to reclaim political power and distribute it into the hands of the people.

Unfortunately, the fatigue and burnout suffered as a result of the Democratic National Convention proved too much for the young organization. Disheartened and demoralized, members dropped out of politics in droves after Chicago, leaving VVAW to languish, moribund, for much of the subsequent year. But the story did not end there. To the surprise of many, VVAW was resuscitated in the closing months of 1969 and built into an independent mass movement. The profusion of activism that came to fruition in the early 1970s cemented VVAW's leftward drift. The nucleus of this identity, though, had been part of VVAW from the beginning in its grassroots politics, popular protests, and rejection of hierarchies of power. The events of the 1970s just saw it grow in new and sometimes more radical directions.

CHAPTER TWO

Years of Protest

VVAW's transformation into a mass protest movement was not instantaneous. Even after its resuscitation in the fall of 1969, change proved slow. Efforts to transform the organization were spearheaded by a new class of antiwar Vietnam veterans more willing to engage in bold and confrontational activism. Indicative of this aggressive, insurgent spirit, the revived leadership in New York placed an increased focus on conducting independent demonstrations implemented and organized at its own behest. Between 1970 and 1971 VVAW organized some of the most poignant and provocative antiwar demonstrations of the Vietnam era, employing "guerrilla theater" — political plays performed in public spaces — to communicate the daily injustices American soldiers committed and witnessed in Southeast Asia. The most common actions VVAWers performed were mock search-and-destroy missions and war crimes hearings, before adding symbolic demonstrations of civil disobedience to their repertoire. Collectively, these guerrilla theater performances embodied the group's twin approach to dissent: action and testimony. But they also connected the veterans to the broader counterculture from which the method of protest evolved. VVAWers, like many of their sixties contemporaries, did not discriminate between political and cultural activism. Instead, they blended them together to create a unique antiwar Vietnam veterans culture founded on expressive street theater, counterculture iconography, and an expansive set of antistatist convictions.

On January, 20, 1969, Richard Milhous Nixon was sworn in as the thirty-seventh president of the United States. It was a cold, rainy day made worse for Nixon by the presence of several thousand demonstrators shouting antiwar slogans as the presidential limousine crept its way up

Pennsylvania Avenue. Some protestors threw sticks and stones at the moving vehicle; a few others tossed smoke bombs. Such disruptions aside, the “counterinaugural” was a poorly run event. Whilst it succeeded in incensing the nation’s new commander-in-chief, its clunky execution “demoralized” its organizers and spoke to the peace movement’s declining momentum.¹ Nixon’s victory had been secured in part by his promise to end the war in Vietnam, and while antiwar activists generally distrusted him, much of the country felt it prudent to give the newly-elected president the benefit of the doubt. “There was a political sense that you couldn’t attack [Nixon] until he’d been in office long enough that he owned the war,” antiwar activist Sam Brown explained. “I mean, to sort of go after him in January and February would have been silly. People would have looked at you and said, ‘Wait a minute. The guy says he’s got a plan. Give him a chance.’”²

For his first nine months in office Nixon oscillated in his approach to the war. In March he expanded the conflict into Cambodia with an aggressive bombing campaign to impress upon Hanoi the new administration’s muscular resolve. At the same time, Nixon took steps to avoid stirring the peace movement by keeping the bombings a secret and beginning the process of significant troop withdrawal with announcements in June (25,000) and September (an additional 35,000). Frustrations with the president’s foot-dragging, nevertheless, grew steadily. By September, support for the war dropped to 35 percent.³ With antiwar sentiments no longer a fringe opinion, peace advocates worked to mount a fall offensive. On October 15 over two million Americans took to the streets to demand immediate military withdrawal from Southeast Asia. National in scope, the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam played out in hundreds of towns and cities across the country as demonstrators gathered together to attend rallies, public

¹ Wells, *War Within*, 292-293.

² *Ibid.*, 328.

³ *Ibid.*, 290-291, 586; Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 417.

vigils, speeches, and teach-ins. Others pursued more independent expressions of protest, or took time to discuss the conflict with their friends and family. Students, middle-class professionals, businessmen, and mainstream politicians were heavily represented among the crowds, as were many Vietnam veterans who came out to show their support.⁴ The latter group's presence was not accidental. Prior to the October action, Moratorium organizers approached Sheldon Ramsdell about soliciting Vietnam veterans for the event. Jan Barry, who retained all of VVAW's contact lists, was also recruited, and the two went to work phoning and mailing prospective participants.⁵

Encouraged by the outpouring of support for the Moratorium demonstration, VVAW reestablished itself in New York at 150 Fifth Avenue in the fall of 1969. Its reactivation marked the organization's unofficial rebirth. Although the group never formally terminated its operations after the Democratic National Convention, all signs of organizational activity had ceased by the fall of 1969. Los Angeles's Jim Boggio, who assumed the role of VVAW's chief coordinator in Barry's absence, was "no where to be found" at the time of the Moratorium. Rumors circled that "the group splintered after elements of...the YSA [Young Socialist Alliance] tried to take it over."⁶ The work of rebuilding VVAW thus fell to Barry and a core group of new leaders who started filtering into the New York City office in the weeks and months following the October protest. Past members, to be sure, did not shy away from rejoining the group. Sheldon Ramsdell, Mike McCusker, and David Braum came back as active and productive members. But they were now joined by a new cohort of veterans shaped by the bloody battles of Tet, the rising tide of GI activism, and their mutual outrage with the overcrowded and under-funded VA health care system.

⁴ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *American Ordeal*, 255-258.

⁵ Ramsdell, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 205.

⁶ Peter N. Martinsen, "Background Questionnaire," in author's possession.

Lieutenant Craig Scott Moore joined VVAW shortly after the October Moratorium. Born to an affluent liberal family, he enlisted in the Army with patriotic plans of a career in the military. As with so many young soldiers, his time in Vietnam negated these aspirations and he returned home in the summer of 1969 overwhelmingly antiwar. In November he searched out VVAW and became its new vice president.⁷ This same narrative arc typified the experience of most incoming members. Joe Urgo, for example, enlisted in the Air Force in May 1966, specifically requesting service in Vietnam, and wound up stationed at the Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base, outside Saigon, where he worked security. His love of country and sense of duty ran deep. A strong anticommunist in his youth, Urgo joined the Young Americans for Freedom and volunteered for Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign in New York City before entering the service.⁸ He arrived in Vietnam "gung-ho," but the grueling Tet Offensive left him jaded and disillusioned. NLF forces hit his base hard during the surprise blitz, leaving several of his friends dead or wounded. "I sat up all night and watched this whole thing take place," Urgo recalled. "The reality hit me hard. That experience, the incompetence that I saw on every level, and why these guys died—that is what changed [me]."⁹

In May 1970, Urgo went to work for the national headquarters, now at 156 Fifth Avenue, and served as its public relations officer. There he met Al Hubbard, one of VVAW's most dynamic and enduring organizers. Older than most others in the group, Hubbard first enlisted in the Air Force in 1952 and served 14 years before his honorable discharge in October 1966. A decorated Korean War vet, he also claimed a two-year stint in Vietnam that he said ended after he survived a traumatic plane crash in Danang.¹⁰ The decision to substitute military service for

⁷ Nicosia, *Home to War*, 57; Hunt, *Turning*, 35.

⁸ Joe Urgo, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁰ William Overend, "Who Is Al Hubbard?" *National Review*, June 1, 1971, 589.

social activism after his release seemed an easy choice for the energetic black veteran, whose passion for justice was already acute. Sharply analytical, Hubbard possessed a casual yet compelling personality that made him an instant leader. “The guys respected him, and he was absolutely crucial” to the organization’s development, said Mike Oliver, another stalwart organizer who worked in the national office.¹¹ In recognition of his talented capabilities, Hubbard became VVAW’s executive secretary and the group’s most visible spokesperson.

As the new leadership settled in, VVAW worked vigorously to enlarge its membership and spread its antiwar message. They began on the East Coast with a small fleet of “Peace Vans” tasked with visiting twenty-four colleges over a two-day period in mid-December to build support for another upcoming Moratorium demonstration. Consistent with the Moratorium’s aim of broadening the antiwar movement beyond the country’s metropolitan areas, stops included Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and Skidmore College in upstate New York.¹² President Nixon’s invasion of Cambodia five months later, followed by the killing of six student demonstrators by the National Guard and police at Kent State and Jackson State universities in May 1970, accelerated the political conversion of several Vietnam veterans as they watched their government draw new battle lines at home.¹³ “It wasn’t until Kent State and Cambodia that I started to get active again,” ex-Marine corpsman Jack McCloskey recalled. “When they turned their guns against their own people here at Kent State, when I saw American people believing the lies about Cambodia, that was it.”¹⁴ John Kniffin, a former Marine, concurred: “The Kent State thing went down, and I started to have the disturbing feeling that what went on in Vietnam

¹¹ Nicosia, *Home to War*, 50-51.

¹² “‘Peace Vans’ Tour Colleges,” *Bennington Banner*, December 9, 1969.

¹³ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *American Ordeal*, 279.

¹⁴ Jack McCloskey, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 99.

was going to happen here in the United States.... [I worried] the same kind of crap that I participated in was going to come home to roost.”¹⁵

The throngs of members who filtered into VVAW from 1970 to 1971 did much to push the organization toward a more militant posture. They were aided in this endeavor by the thriving antiwar GI movement clamoring within the Armed Forces which in addition to being highly political bore the markings of the sixties counterculture. Drugs formed part of the basis of this dissident subgroup with 30 to 35 percent of American GIs experimenting with marijuana in-country. As the war continued, heroin, too, became a recreational outlet for some soldiers. While never reaching the epidemic-like proportions assumed by the media, an estimated 7 to 35 percent of soldiers, many of them draftees, were believed to have tried the drug overseas.¹⁶ In 1969, Country Joe and the Fish’s “I Feel like I’m Fixin to Die Rag” became the most popularly played song in Vietnam with its bitter refrain: “And it’s one, two, three/What are we fighting for?” In keeping with the tune’s antiwar theme, many soldiers grew out their hair, donned peace pendants, wore Black Power wristbands, and hung love beads around their necks.¹⁷ A large network of stateside GI coffeehouses run by soldiers and antiwar civilians outside U.S. military bases likewise materialized in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Much like the expansive underground GI press soldiers sustained between 1968 and 1974, which circulated hundreds of separate mimeographed newspapers, these gathering points were important incubators of the movement’s cultural politics, creating antiauthoritarian environments where soldiers could congregate and freely question the war.¹⁸

¹⁵ John Kniffin, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 112.

¹⁶ Jeremy Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the Modern War on Drugs* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 5, 18-20, 29-32.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 31; Anderson, *Movement and the Sixties*, 376.

¹⁸ Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt*, 52-55; *Sir! No Sir!: The Suppressed Story of the GI Movement to End the War in Vietnam*, DVD, prod. and dir. David Zeiger (Los Angeles: Displaced Films, 2005).

Naturally, a number of soldiers carried these political and cultural attitudes home with them as they made the transition to their post-service lives. Whereas VVAWers in the organization's initial stages donned their "Sunday best" for demonstrations and avoided abrasive displays of militancy, the incoming cohort more closely resembled the posture of the GI counterculture. Rejecting the conformity of "straight" society, they grew their hair long, sported beards and mustaches, listened to rock music, experimented with drugs, and in lieu of suits and ties wore their olive-drab jungle fatigues for a more radical effect.

Consistent with this emerging identity, VVAW furthered its association with the sixties counterculture and its fusion of culture and politics, embracing the technique of guerrilla theater to heighten the group's dramatic protest. Defined as a "theater of statement," and modeled after a variety of "historical antecedents" — among them the sixteenth-century Italian theatrical form *commedia dell'arte* — guerrilla theater was popularized in the United States by San Francisco Mime Troupe founder R.G. Davis in 1965 as a strategy for inciting a "*cultural* revolt aimed at replacing discredited American values and norms." Borrowing heavily from Che Guevara's *foco* theory of revolution, Davis emphasized flexible, didactic performances delivered in public spaces.¹⁹ In his original vision "public space" meant public parks, but as other social movement groups latched on to guerrilla theater as a source of inspiration they used its form to conduct radical vignettes around street corners, college campuses, parking lots, shopping malls, libraries, plant gates, and community centers.²⁰ The genre's nimble, improvisational style proved especially alluring. Unlike traditional demonstrations where protestors assembled in large numbers to march down streets and listen to rousing speeches delivered by movement leaders,

¹⁹ Michael William Doyle, "Staging the Revolution: Guerrilla Theater as a Countercultural Practice, 1965-1968," in *Imagine Nation*, 72-74; Henry Lesnik, "Some Introductory Notes to Guerrilla/Street Theater," in *Guerrilla Theater*, ed. Henry Lesnik (New York: Avon Books, 1973), 11.

²⁰ Lesnik, "Some Introductory Notes," 11.

guerrilla theater proffered an alternative, highly participatory form of protest that directly engaged demonstrators and their audience. Indeed, because of its dramatic style, guerrilla theater forced even the most reluctant observers to be drawn into the actors' narratives as "extras," creating an emotional, visceral response from people who otherwise did their best to distance themselves from the war and political engagement.

VVAW's earliest guerrilla theater performance, Operation Rapid American Withdrawal (RAW), furnished a model for later resistance. RAW took place in September 1970 over the Labor Day weekend. It consisted of a four-day mock search-and-destroy mission from Morristown, New Jersey, to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, tracing the same route once traveled by the U.S. Revolutionary Army. Its purpose: to bring the war home to the American people and impress upon them the need for "an immediate cessation of fighting and withdrawal of American troops from Indochina." Reaching out to the so-called "silent center" was another central objective. "These are small towns we'll be going through," VVAW executive secretary Al Hubbard explained. "We feel it's middle America which so far hasn't been exposed much in the way of demonstrations."²¹ To achieve the necessary realism, roughly 150 veterans marched in jungle fatigues carrying pistol belts, canteens, sleeping bags, C-rations, and toy M-16 rifles. No flags or posters were carried during the demonstration. VVAW vice-president Scott Moore led the march, keeping to a strict schedule. Campsites were determined in advance, as were arrival and departure times, meals, steering committee meetings, and ten prearranged "incidents" — guerrilla theater demonstrations designed to simulate "the way an American unit would act when they came into a Vietnamese village."²²

²¹ "Operation RAW: Why We Are Marching," memorandum, n.d. (c. July 1970), Box 13, VVAW Papers, WSHS; Pat O'Haire, "R.A.W. Feelings," *New York Daily News*, August 28, 1970.

²² "Operation RAW Interim Report #2," July 31, 1970, Box 13; Operation RAW schedule, September 1, 1970, Box 13, VVAW Papers, WSHS; Bob Hanson, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 230.

A documentary film crew tagged along to record the march. To heighten its authenticity VVAW approached the Philadelphia Guerrilla Theater, a drama troupe, to assist in the production. Dressed as civilians, troupe members played the role of South Vietnamese peasants in harrowing interrogation reenactments strategically staged for an unsuspecting public. Among the designated sites selected were a pharmacy, courthouse, fire hall, church, and railway station. One the first day, September 4, in Bernardsville, New Jersey, innocent shoppers strolled through the downtown core in “their crisp A-line dresses” and “suits and ties” as the actors, ages 16 to 50, mingled about inconspicuously waiting for the “screaming” cry of the marchers storming into town. As the vets charged forward the actors scrambled, taking cover among the unsuspecting shoppers. Hollering at the crowd, calling them “gooks,” the veterans seized their targets. Victims were “blindfolded and tied to each other in a line.” Others had “gun barrels [thrust] in their faces,” or knives pressed against their throats, as the veterans yelled, “Where’s the VC?” and “Tell us or we’ll kill your daughter!”²³ The “bloodless carnage” concluded with the distribution of fliers, reading: “A U.S. INFANTRY COMPANY JUST CAME THROUGH HERE. If you had been Vietnamese — We might have burned your house...shot your dog...shot you...raped your wife and your daughter...turned you over to your government for torture [or]... done ALL of these things to you and your whole town!”²⁴

Reactions from the crowds varied. In Bernardsville a young woman thanked the veterans for what they were doing. “My older brother was killed in Vietnam,” she said fighting back tears.

²³ Nancy Miller Saunders, *Combat by Trial: An Odyssey with 20th Century Winter Soldiers* (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2008), 31-32, 35. Nancy Miller Saunders was part of the documentary film crew contacted by VVAW to shoot footage of Operation RAW and, later, the Winter Soldier Investigation. Impressed by what she saw, Saunders remained involved in the organization for several years, working out of its many southern chapters. Her memoir offers a rare look into the day-to-day happenings of VVAW, quoting extensively from unpublished journals and interviews she conducted with key members, many of whom were not a part of the national office.

²⁴ “A U.S. Infantry Company Just Came Through Here,” VVAW flier, n.d., in author’s possession.

“I don’t want my younger brother to have to go.”²⁵ Closer to Valley Forge, in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, motorists honked their horns, flashed the peace sign, and shouted words of encouragement as they drove past the marching throng.²⁶ Onlookers were less charitable in Hunterdon County, New Jersey, calling the vets a “disgrace” while scolding: “This is the kind of thing that’s causing riots in Chicago and other cities.”²⁷ Later, on the final day, a prowar counter-demonstration, organized by a local Veterans of Foreign Wars chapter, gathered to jeer at the marchers as they filed into Valley Forge Park, denouncing them as “traitors” and “cowards.”²⁸ Such abuse was a bitter pill to swallow, but the crowd of 1,500 supporters gathered to greet the veterans buoyed their spirits. Chanting “What do you want?” and answering “Peace Now,” the “weary” vets made their way toward the enthusiastic crowd carrying several black body bags to represent the 43,419 men whose lives had been lost as a result of the war so far. The audience cheered, responding in a “growing chorus”: “Stop the war; stop the war.”²⁹ On hand to address the marchers stood a consortium of antiwar activists including the celebrity-turned-radical Jane Fonda, controversial author-lawyer Mark Lane, Democratic rabble rouser Allard Lowenstein, and VVAW’s newest recruit, John Kerry, whose rousing speech drew some of the strongest cheers from the crowd. The event concluded with the veterans breaking the toy guns carried with them on the march.³⁰

Operation RAW was John Kerry’s first major encounter with the antiwar veterans’ movement. Unlike the vast majority of Vietnam veterans who hailed from decidedly working-

²⁵ Saunders, *Combat by Trial*, 36.

²⁶ “Antiwar Veterans Continue March,” *New York Times*, September 7, 1970.

²⁷ Ronald Sullivan, “War Protesters Meet Opposition,” *New York Times*, September 6, 1970.

²⁸ “Antiwar Vietnam Veterans Finish 4-Day March,” *New York Times*, September 8, 1970.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Douglas Brinkley, *Tour of Duty: John Kerry and the Vietnam War* (New York City: William Morrow, 2004), 344-345.

class backgrounds, Kerry grew up in relative comfort.³¹ As a youth he attended St. Paul's preparatory school in Concord, New Hampshire, and spent summers in Europe before graduating from Yale University in 1966 where he cultivated a reputation as a skilled orator. Uncertain about the war, but driven by a strong sense of duty to his country, the young Kerry bucked the trend of most Ivy Leaguers his age by volunteering for service in the U.S. Navy.³² Eager to serve in an active capacity, he campaigned to be made a "Swift boat" commander, a perilous task that entailed patrolling the internal waterways of the Mekong Delta. In this capacity, Kerry was made a Lieutenant (j.g.) and earned his reputation as a war hero, receiving a Silver Star, a Bronze Star, and three Purple Hearts.³³ Increasingly disillusioned, Kerry returned home in 1969 with thoughts of segueing into politics. He chaired Richard F. Drinan's campaign, an antiwar Catholic priest, hoping to unseat Philip J. Philbin, the hawkish Democratic congressman from Massachusetts. While serving as chairman, he caught the attention of some VVAWers in the national office and promptly joined. Gradually, he would develop into the organization's most recognized leader.³⁴

In the interim, the war's brutality continued to be a subject of focus for VVAW in its second demonstration: the Winter Soldier Investigation, which took place from January 31 to February 2, 1971. Revelations of the 1968 My Lai massacre, in which U.S. forces under the command of Lieutenant William Calley systematically murdered 347 to 504 Vietnamese civilians (estimates vary), provided part of the impetus for the event. Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh detailed the tragedy in a series of reports written for the Dispatch News Service syndicate beginning in November 1969. The military managed to conceal the story for more than a year. But when Hersh's story broke, so too did the subject of war crimes in Vietnam.

³¹ See Appy, *Working-Class War*, 11-43.

³² Brinkley, *Tour of Duty*, 55-56, 60-61, 63.

³³ For a more thorough account of Kerry's time as a Swift boat commander in Vietnam, see *ibid.*, 154-318.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 338-343.

VVAWers initially expressed caution about addressing the issue, and for awhile only Jan Barry pursued the subject with any interest. “A lot of veterans didn’t want to touch this with a 10-foot pole,” he explained. “[A] lot of people felt badly for having participated in what they participated in. It took six months, well into 1970, for people in VVAW to warm up to the idea.”³⁵

Planning for the Winter Soldier Investigation began in earnest in the fall of 1970. More than one hundred Vietnam veterans were scheduled to participate. To secure such recruits, VVAW executive secretary Al Hubbard circulated the country after Operation RAW building chapters in small college towns as part a public speaking tour hosted by Jane Fonda. Most Vietnam veterans were in their twenties and divided time between work and school, making college campuses ideal centers of organizing. VVAW national coordinator Mike Oliver followed up on Hubbard’s contacts to gather additional data and identify possible chapter leaders.³⁶ Ohio’s William Crandell made similar trips in search of testimony between Columbus and Minneapolis, establishing chapters along the way.³⁷ Scheduled to begin on January 31, as many as five hundred Vietnam veterans assembled in Detroit for three days of war crimes hearings at the local Howard Johnson’s New Center Motor Lodge to explain how and why an unconscionable tragedy such as My Lai could occur. The event’s title paid homage to Thomas Paine’s 1776 pamphlet, “The American Crisis,” where he wrote: “These are the times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will in this crisis shrink from the service of his country, but he that stands it now deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.”³⁸ Like the winter soldiers

³⁵ Barry, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 235-236.

³⁶ Urgo, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 233; Saunders, *Combat by Trial*, 47-50.

³⁷ Crandell, “They Moved the Town,” 147-148.

³⁸ William Crandell, “Winter Soldier Investigation: Opening Statement,” n.d. (January 31, 1971), 1, Box 18, Folder 39, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

who stood firm in 1776, not wilting in the face of adversity, the Vietnam veterans gathered in Detroit to fulfill their patriotic duties by “telling Americans what is being done in their name.”³⁹

Exploring the issue of wartime atrocities was not novel to VVAW. Prior to the Winter Soldier Investigation, the Bertrand Russell Foundation sponsored two International War Crimes Tribunals in 1967, the first in Sweden followed by another in Denmark. Three years later, in 1970, the Citizens Commission of Inquiry on U.S. War Crimes in Vietnam (CCI) conducted their own investigations in cities like Los Angeles, New York, Boston, Baltimore, and Buffalo. Building on these successes, CCI developed plans for a “national commission” on Indochina war crimes in Washington, D.C., featuring testimony from Vietnam veterans, international lawyers, scientists, clergymen, and doctors.⁴⁰ Costs prevented the project from getting off the ground, so the group partnered with VVAW in August 1970 to coordinate the Winter Soldier Investigation. It was a logical pairing. From the arrangement CCI gained access to VVAW’s membership rolls, contacts, and fund raising capabilities, while VVAW acquired the invaluable experience of CCI’s seasoned organizers.⁴¹ The partnership lasted long enough to set the foundation for Winter Soldier, now moved from Washington to Detroit, but by November CCI had grown disenchanted with the effort and severed its relations with VVAW citing personnel differences. CCI eventually held its own hearings in the nation’s capital.⁴²

Momentary set-backs owing to CCI’s departure notwithstanding, the Winter Soldier Investigation proceeded as scheduled. Crandell, VVAW’s Midwest coordinator, delivered the opening address. “The Winter Soldier Investigation is not a mock trial,” he announced. “There

³⁹ Winter Soldier Investigation, advertisement, n.d. (c. late 1970-early 1971), Box 18, Folder 37, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁴⁰ CCI National Coordinators Jeremy Rifkin, Tod Ensign, and Louise Hellinger to the Coordinating Committee, June 4, 1970, in author’s possession.

⁴¹ Hunt, *Turning*, 60-61; Barry, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 235.

⁴² For more on CCI and its split with VVAW, see Michael Uhl, *Vietnam Awakening: My Journey from Combat to the Citizens’ Commission of Inquiry on U.S. War Crimes in Vietnam* (Jefferson, NC; McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2007).

will be no phony indictments; there will be no verdict against Uncle Sam.” Our purpose is “to bear witness not against America, but against those policymakers who are perverting America.”⁴³ Sitting behind long folding tables, with microphones poised to capture and carry every word, panel after panel relayed with startling frankness stories of murder, torture, rape, arson, and destruction.⁴⁴ The constellation of violence presented was acute: soldiers using free-fire zones to kill innocent peasants; hootches razed to the ground; livestock indiscriminately shot; the acquisition of information using “clubs, rifle butts, pistols, knives,” and electric shock.⁴⁵ Just as in Operation RAW, VVAWers at the Winter Soldier Investigation honed their wartime experiences into a single, collective counter-narrative, substituting stories of murder torture, and devastation for traditional patriotic platitudes of liberty, democracy, and goodwill. Individual moral failure alone could not account for the quotidian nature of American atrocities in Vietnam, they argued. Military policy had precipitated their moral failings and encouraged their criminality. “[W]hat was done in Vietnam — in terms of the torture, murder, massacres, rape —

⁴³ Crandell, “Opening Statement,” 1, 3.

⁴⁴ Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 26, 28, 74-75, 84, 113, 120. To ensure testimony was reliable, the organizers established their own fact-checking system. “The vets in Detroit — Bill Crandell, Tim Butz, Mike Oliver, and Scott Moore — drafted a set of questions that were very good at making sure that we were not getting bullshitted and lied to,” VVAW national officer Joe Urgo recalled. “We tried to rely on at least a double confirmation and then sometimes a triple confirmation that the story had to check out.” Nevertheless, skepticism regarding the authenticity of testimony presented at the Winter Soldier Investigation has been the source of some controversy over the years. Opponents on the Right have tried to discredit VVAW by charging that several of those who participated in Winter Soldier were frauds attempting to undermine an American victory in Vietnam. In 2004 these accusations gained new life when Winter Soldier participant, Steve Pitkin, publicly retracted his statements from the inquiry. Aside from Pitkin, though, who made no mention of war crimes in his testimony, no other veterans have stepped forward to follow his lead. Likewise, except for the unsubstantiated claim made by Guenter Lewy in his 1978 study, *America in Vietnam*, that VVAW employed “fake witnesses” in the Winter Soldier Investigation to further its political objectives, no credible evidence has been presented to support the accusation that those who spoke in Detroit were not bona fide Vietnam veterans.

Nor have critics successfully disputed the quality of the testimony presented. Torture, murder, the burning of villages, bodily mutilation — these things happened in Vietnam. Not even apologists like Lewy deny it. Where differences of interpretation lie is in whether these horrors were the result of a national policy directed by leaders in Washington, or examples of individual malice indicative of nothing more than a few bad apples. The Winter Soldier Investigation argued on behalf of the former, suggesting that war crimes were the direct result of national military strategies like free-fire zones and search-and-destroy missions. Doubters disagree and invoke the latter argument to undermine the event’s credibility. Urgo, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 237-238; Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 317.

was not individual decisions by individual GIs,” VVAW national officer Joe Uργο explained, “but in fact policy that had been worked out by the centers of the United States government, through its think tanks, war colleges, [and the] Pentagon....”⁴⁶ Oregon state coordinator Mike McCusker concurred, stating: “William Calley [alone] cannot be held responsible for the war policy of America. My Lai was a natural outgrowth of policies which are carried out day to day.” To convey this, the organizers arranged the hearing chronologically by combat unit, year, and location to emphasize the continuity in the way policies were carried out “across the years.”⁴⁷

As per Crandell’s opening remarks, the veterans made no official verdict. Yet by the event’s end a consistent pattern had taken shape, one singling out the United States government for setting a “standard of war bordering on full and final genocide.”⁴⁸ VVAW’s vilification of government as a source of death and destruction did not, however, preclude it from trying to alter state policies through grassroots mobilization. If establishment elites were the problem, VVAWers looked to ordinary Americans as part of the solution. In both Operation RAW and Winter Soldier, VVAW organizers concentrated their efforts on appealing to what they perceived as the Midwest’s nascent antiwar convictions. In pursuing this end, the group mirrored R.G. Davis’s “three-pronged program” for guerrilla theater: “teach, direct toward change, [and] be an example of change.”⁴⁹ Participants met the first two objectives by conveying their wartime experiences through theatrical reenactments and dramatic testimony, and identifying high-ranking state policymakers as the war’s chief culprit. The third point found articulation in VVAW’s choice of venues. The decision to host the Winter Soldier Investigation in Detroit

⁴⁶ Uργο, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 237.

⁴⁷ Mike McCusker, interview in the *Daily Planet*, reproduced in SAC, Portland (100-12313), to Director, FBI, November 30, 1971, 5, FBI File No. 100-HQ-448092: PSM Folder No. [22], Reel 4, FOIA; Uργο, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 238.

⁴⁸ Crandell, “Opening Statement,” 2.

⁴⁹ Doyle, “Staging the Revolution,” 74.

paralleled the logic of marching through small town America in Operation RAW: to energize the region's blue-collar base against the war. "We are college students, members of various professions, but we are primarily the sons of construction workers. We have come home to speak to our parents," they declared at the outset of Winter Soldier.⁵⁰ In bypassing Washington, D.C., VVAW sought to draw more Midwesterners into the peace movement. The feeling was "[i]f we take it out to middle America and we shake up middle America, *they'll* shake up Congress," Jan Barry recalled.⁵¹

In hindsight, some veterans judged this emphasis on reaching out to middle America an error in strategy, citing the relative lack of media coverage as limiting the impact of VVAW's first two events. Indeed, outside the *New York Times*, which offered daily updates on Operation RAW, neither demonstration attracted much national attention. The Winter Soldier Investigation received strong coverage in regional newspapers like the *Detroit Free Press* and *Chicago Sun-Times*, but aside from a lone article in *The New Republic* and one in the *New York Times*, each published well-after the event, as well as a fleeting mention on CBS News, it too suffered a virtual media blackout.⁵² In the weeks following Winter Soldier, VVAW's membership grew exponentially. But this had more to do with the work VVAW organizers put in scouring the country in search of participants, along with a well-placed advertisement in *Playboy* magazine, donated by its editor Hugh Hefner, than either of the two demonstrations. The *Playboy* coup in

⁵⁰ "Why Detroit?," part of a pamphlet advertising the Winter Soldier Investigation, n.d. (c. December 1970-January 1971), Box 18, Folder 37, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁵¹ Barry quoted in Wells, *War Within*, 462.

⁵² Hunt, *Turning*, 72-73. For media coverage of Winter Soldier in the Midwest, see "Vietnam Vets Plan Own Crime Probe," *Grand Haven, Mich. Tribune*, January 16, 1971; William Schmidt, "Ex-GIs to Tell of Atrocities," *Detroit Free Press*, January 31, 1971; William Schmidt, "Probe Sought on Atrocity Charges," *Detroit Free Press*, February 2, 1971; William Schmidt and Gene Goltz, "Winter Soldiers Tell Gruesome War Stories in Detroit," *Chicago Sun-Times*, February 1, 1971; Bill Schmidt and Gene Goltz, "'Just Blew Kids Away' — Winter Soldiers Tell War Horror Stories," *Chicago Sun-Times*, February 1, 1971; William Schmidt, "Cong Prisoners Wired, Jolted With Electricity — Ex-GI," *Chicago Sun-Times*, February 2, 1971; "Winter Soldiers Proves War Is Hell," *Jackson Citizen Patriot*, February 3, 1971. See also, "Veterans Assess Atrocity Blame," *New York Times*, February 7, 1971; Peter Michelson, "Bringing the War Home: Veterans Testify Against the Atrocity in Indochina," *The New Republic*, February 27, 1971.

particular drew thousands to the group. Appearing in the magazine's February issue, the ad featured an arresting image of a solitary coffin sitting in a dark room with an American flag draped across it and bold text reading: "In the last ten years, over 335,000 of our buddies have been killed or wounded in Vietnam. And more are being killed and wounded every day. We don't think it's worth it." A small membership card sat in the bottom right-hand corner for veterans to fill out and mail in. According to one estimate, the advertisement led to 3,700 new members at a rate of 250 per day. In less than a year, VVAW's membership rolls had swelled from a paltry 600 in May 1970 to 8,500 in February 1971.⁵³

With this influx of new members the national office retooled its organizational structure. Since its resuscitation in late 1969, a small executive committee in the New York office led by Al Hubbard, Scott Moore, and Mike Oliver assumed responsibility for running VVAW at the national level. But in February 1971, shortly after the Winter Soldier Investigation, steps were taken to formally devolve the national office's power and redistribute it to the regional coordinators — a new position designed to reflect VVAW's changing complexion. At the February meeting, twenty-six regional coordinators were elected as the "official representatives of VVAW in their respective geographical areas." Collectively, they formed the "national steering committee" tasked with governing VVAW policy.⁵⁴ As part of this new apparatus, regional coordinators were granted "full authority to make all decisions relative to VVAW operations consistent with VVAW philosophy and policy as determined by the National Steering

⁵³ *Playboy*, February 1971, 65; Al Hubbard, "Opening Statement—VVAW Regional Coordinators Conference," [Draft] February 19, 1971, 1-2, Box 1, Folder 6; "History," n.d. (c. late February 1971), Box 1, Folder 3, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁵⁴ Joining the twenty-six regional coordinators on the national steering committee were those national officers sitting on the executive committee — the president, vice president, executive secretary, treasurer, and public relations officer. In this new schema, the executive committee's role was to "conduct the business and implement the programs of [VVAW]" (i.e. handle the day-to-day operations), making the national steering committee the group's primary "governing body." Hubbard, "Opening Statement," 3; "Resolutions for the Regional Coordinator Position," adopted February 19, 1971, Box 1, Folder 6, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

Committee in their respective geographical area of responsibility.”⁵⁵ The reasons for pursuing this approach were clear. “We can no longer pretend with just the executive committee in the national office in New York to truly represent our membership,” said Hubbard. Locally, though, not much changed for VVAW chapters. “The few people who were in New York had no control over what anybody did in some other state,” recalled Jan Barry, still then the group’s acting president. As a late 1970 memorandum assured, “the actual organizing and operating of a local chapter of VVAW can and should preferably still be as autonomous and diverse as possible.”⁵⁶

The introduction of regional coordinators brought stronger geographical diversity to the New York headquarters as well as differing political perspectives. VVAW’s third and largest protest, Dewey Canyon III, scheduled for the third week in April, reflected this pluralism.⁵⁷ Billed as a five-day “incursion into the countries of Congress, the Supreme Court, and the Fourth Estate,” some 2,300 antiwar vets descended on Washington, D.C., for a week full of lobbying, guerrilla theater, and civil disobedience.⁵⁸ The decision to go to Washington stemmed from the view that more pressure needed to be placed on those funding and directing the war effort. It was also a tacit acknowledgement by the leadership that despite their best efforts in trying to mobilize the Midwest, holding a demonstration in a working-class industrial city, far from the nation’s capital, did not yield the results they were looking for. John Kerry, who kept a low profile in the organization until after the Winter Soldier Investigation, first floated the idea for a Washington-based demonstration at the February national steering committee meeting in New York City.

⁵⁵ “Resolutions for the Regional Coordinator Position.”

⁵⁶ Hubbard, “Opening Statement,” 2-3; Barry, interview with author, October 30, 2013; “Outline for Organizing and Operating Chapters,” n.d. (c. late 1970), Box 7, Folder 37, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁵⁷ “Dewey Canyon III” was a pun referencing the 1969 secret invasion of Laos by U.S. forces, codenamed Dewey Canyon I. A second invasion into Laos, originally dubbed Dewey Canyon II, was renamed Lam Son 719 and carried out in early 1971 under the auspice of the South Vietnamese Army.

⁵⁸ Al Hubbard, “The Winter Soldier Offensive (Phase-3): Dewey Canyon 3,” n.d. (1971), 1, VVAW Papers, Box 8, Folder 12, WSHS; Hamid Mowlana and Paul H. Geffert, “Vietnam Veterans Against the War: A Profile Study of the Dissenters,” in John Kerry and Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The New Soldier*, eds. David Thorne and George Butler (New York: Collier Books, 1971), 172.

Those in attendance received the proposal warmly, yet debates over the tone demonstrators should assume remained unresolved and contested up until, and during, the protest itself.⁵⁹

Preparations for Dewey Canyon III began at once. Veterans worked long hours building contacts and making the necessary arrangements to accomplish the Herculean tasks in front of them. Much of the work was unglamorous and grassroots. A small cadre of VVAWers in Washington — Mike Phelan, Tim Butz, Jack Mallory, Rick Thorngate, and John O'Connor (who was later revealed to be an undercover police officer) — took the reigns in obtaining permits, handling media relations, and drumming up support for the demonstration.⁶⁰ “We had very little funding and virtually no budget,” Thorngate said. What office space they found came donated to them by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).⁶¹ Permits were equally hard to come by, and much of their energy went into prepping the D.C. community for the April protest. “As time went on we developed lists of people who were planning to join us from other states and began to do street work in D.C., visiting bars at night,” recalled Thorngate. They made a concerted effort to initiate contact with Washington’s predominantly black residents: “[We] felt it was critical to have real representation when we hit the streets.”⁶² Likewise, a week before the demonstration, the Washington chapter distributed a leaflet titled, “An Open Letter to Our Brothers in Blue,” to the D.C. Police Department, which employed several Vietnam vets. The pale blue pamphlet, written by Mike Oliver, sought to diffuse tensions between protestors and the police, “spelling out,” in William Crandell’s words, “our opposition to the war, our pride in

⁵⁹ Barry, interview with author, October 30, 2013; Brinkley, *Tour of Duty*, 349.

⁶⁰ On John O'Connor, see Hunt, *Turning*, 84-85.

⁶¹ Rick Thorngate, “Operation Dewey Canyon III,” *The Veteran*, Spring 2009, 40.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 40.

service, and our disinclination to engage in ‘pig-baiting.’” As Thorngate remembered, “The flyers were accepted with friendly suspicion.”⁶³

Outside Washington VVAW chapters worked diligently to recruit additional veterans and raise the organization’s profile. In Madison, Wisconsin, VVAW joined with representatives of a local “Vets for Peace” group to build a formal coalition against the war and launch a constellation of activism in the state’s capital. “Leafletting and canvassing for referendums on the wars, picketing draft boards, organizing rallies, participating in televised debates, testifying before congressional committees on the war, lobbying, and touring the campus banquet circuit are [among the veterans’] ongoing activities,” reported the *Madison Capital Times*.⁶⁴ On Saturday, April 3, VVAWers from Detroit, Washington, Philadelphia, and New York City joined the Connecticut chapter in rededicating Judges Cave, a historical sanctuary sitting atop West Rock Ridge named after three colonial officers who took refuge in New Haven after signing a death warrant for Charles I. Finding inspiration in the officers’ credo, “Opposition to tyranny is obedience to God,” the vets delivered heartfelt remarks and read passages from the works of Thomas Paine.⁶⁵ The following day they conducted a teach-in on Vietnam led by Jan Barry, met antiwar clergyman William Sloan Coffin to open “the sanctuary for conscience” in Yale’s Battell Chapel, and on Monday sponsored a local Winter Soldier hearing with eighteen participants.⁶⁶ Elsewhere, veterans hosted dances to promote the organization and, in the case of Kansas-

⁶³ Crandell, “They Moved the Town,” 148; Thorngate, “Operation Dewey Canyon III,” 40.

⁶⁴ Jim Hougan, “Vietnam Numbed the Vets, But When They Awaken...,” *Madison Capital Times*, March 3, 1971.

⁶⁵ “Vietnam Vets Against War March Saturday,” *Naugatuck Daily News*, April 1, 1971.

⁶⁶ “Return to West Rock: ‘A New Sanctuary for Liberty,’” event schedule, April 3-4, [1971], 1-2, Box 3, Folder 18; Connecticut VVAW Chapter, Newsletter #2, n.d. (early April 1971), Box 1, Folder 18, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

Oklahoma coordinator, Fed Nienke, secured sympathetic profiles in local newspapers, turning interviews with journalists into informal Winter Soldier testimonials.⁶⁷

On Sunday April 18, antiwar veterans from across the country started filtering in to West Potomac Park in advance of the week's activities. Kerry's original proposal for Dewey Canyon III called for a mass synchronized lobbying campaign aimed at Congress. Organizers divided the encampment up by state and encouraged each group to make lobbying a primary focus. "[Veterans] will be present in every office of Senators and Congressmen and women in the halls of both houses from the time they open until they close, throughout the incursion," Al Hubbard announced.⁶⁸ The decision to appeal to the legislature was as much a symbol of VVAW's grassroots populism as an indication of the veterans' belief that the Nixon White House was a lost cause. As Kerry stated in speaking with a group of senators, "We come here [to Congress], not to the President, because we believe that this body can be responsive to the will of the people, and we believe that the will of the people says that we should be out of Vietnam now."⁶⁹ Wearing olive-drab fatigues and medals across their chests, the veterans performed their duties with mixed results. Legislators with dovish sympathies generally greeted the antiwar vets warmly, sharing their time and resources. Supporters of the president, by contrast, either refused to meet with them or obstinately ignored their pleas.⁷⁰ By the middle of the week, most veterans had left their lobbying posts feeling deflated. Their long hair, scrappy beards, peace medallions, and combat attire — all fixtures of VVAW's counterculture identity — won them no favors with conservative politicians who likely had difficulty distinguishing them from participants of "the previous springtime demonstrations," one reporter noted. Nor were the vets impressed with

⁶⁷ Milwaukee VVAW Chapter, newsletter, May 25, 1971, 1, Box 23, Folder 9, VVAW Papers, WSHS; Jim Fugate, "Local Vietnam Vets Form Group to Inform Public and End War," *Great Bend Tribune*, February 28, 1971.

⁶⁸ Al Hubbard, "The Winter Soldier Offensive (Phase-3)," 3.

⁶⁹ Kerry and VVAW, *New Soldier*, 22.

⁷⁰ Terry DuBose, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 246; Hunt, *Turning*, 98-99.

liberal sympathizers who tried to moderate their expectations. After being counseled by an antiwar senator from Massachusetts on the complexities of the legislative process, one vet shot back: “Then what you’re telling me is that your system can’t deliver.”⁷¹

As part of their lobbying effort, veterans made themselves present at various hearings on Capitol Hill. Approximately 150 VVAWers attended a meeting of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee charged with exploring proposals to end the war. When antiwar Democrat George McGovern took the floor, the veterans in the observation gallery cheered, flashing peace signs and crying out, “Hey there, Senator Dove!”⁷² That same day, about twenty-five other vets delivered personal war crimes testimony at a meeting of the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee after members “prodded” Representative Clement Zablocki to yield the floor to the protestors.⁷³ The lobbying campaign’s major victory, however, came later in the week when John Kerry testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. For years VVAW had worked to secure an invitation to speak before the prestigious body of lawmakers. On Thursday, April 22, Kerry realized this goal in a moving Winter Soldier-inspired testimonial that self-consciously evoked the hearings in Detroit. Surrounded by crowds of journalists, supporters, and cameramen, the young veteran asked the committee seated before him, “How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?” Declaring the war “the biggest nothing in history,” he made the case for disengagement, soberly recounting wartime atrocities, bungled military practices, and the all-consuming “sense of anger and betrayal” dwelling inside the average Vietnam veteran.⁷⁴ It was a triumphant moment for VVAW, catapulting Kerry into the national spotlight.

⁷¹ Art Goldberg, “Vietnam Vets: The Ant-War Army,” *Ramparts*, July 1971, 12; “Once More a Time for Protest,” *Newsweek*, May 3, 1971, 25.

⁷² “Vietnam Veterans Crowd ‘How to End War’ Hearing,” *The Plain Dealer*, April 21, 1971.

⁷³ Richard Bradee, “Witnessed Viet Atrocities, 25 Claim,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 21, 1971.

⁷⁴ Complete Testimony of Lt. John Kerry to Senate Foreign Relations Committee, *Congressional Record* (92nd Congress, 1st Session), April 22, 1971, 180-185.

His success, though, masked the fomenting divisions in the organization. Whereas the clean-cut and Ivy League-educated Kerry navigated Washington's political circles with grace and ease, a growing number of his comrades had by this point already abandoned lobbying in favor of more dramatic displays of street protest. On Monday, 1,100 veterans, some in wheelchairs, others on crutches, marched across the Lincoln Memorial Bridge to Arlington National Cemetery to pay tribute to the war dead on both sides of the conflict. A small group of Gold Star Mothers, women whose sons died in Vietnam, headed the procession. Barred from entering the historic site, the marchers set two wreaths outside the cemetery gates, reassembled, and filed back through the streets toward the Capitol chanting, "One, two, three, four, We don't want you fucking war!" Upon reaching their destination, they listened restlessly as congressional representatives Bella Abzug and Pete McCloskey addressed the crowd. When they pledged to work to "terminate" the war by the end of 1971, several vets interjected, shouting: "End it now. End it now." From there, the majority of veterans moved back to the Mall to set up a campsite, while a few ventured "directly into the halls of Congress to lobby against the war."⁷⁵

The frustration of being rebuked outside Arlington National Cemetery did not abate overnight. And so, the next day, a smaller, more combative contingent of 200 vets returned to demand entry. "We're not here to make speeches," Al Hubbard explained to Superintendent John Metzler. "We're here to honor the dead." Metzler relented and let the marchers inside where they placed two wreaths — one marked "Allied," the other "Indochina" — under an apple tree, then filed out silently with their arms raised in clenched fists and military salutes.⁷⁶ That same day, "demonstration squads" of veterans performed mock search-and-destroy missions outside the Old Senate Office Building and the east steps of the Capitol as crowds of tourists watched in

⁷⁵ Goldberg, "Vietnam Vets," 12; Kerry and VVAW, *New Soldier*, 26-27.

⁷⁶ Sanford J. Ungar and William L. Claiborne, "Vets' Camp on Mall Banned by Burger," *Washington Post*, April 21, 1971.

disbelief. At the Capitol, veterans brandishing toy M-16 rifles fired on three women wearing straw coolie hats attempting to evade their capture. The actors gripped their stomachs and splashed bags of red paint over the Capitol steps. “It’s disgusting. It’s horrible,” declared a middle-aged observer in response to the performance.⁷⁷ Adding to the already haunting visuals, some veterans painted their faces white and etched casualty statistics across their foreheads as if to invoke the symmetry between those who lost their lives and those shackled with the deadening memories of combat. “This is not a Disney Land [*sic*] operation,” assured William Crandell. “We are enacting things we are sorry that we did in Vietnam.”⁷⁸

Encounters such as these emboldened those left-drifting VVAWers who remained skeptical about the benefits of lobbying. None symbolized this growing cohort of radicals more than the California chapter, led by California-Nevada-Hawaii regional coordinator Barry Romo. Raised in a predominantly black and Latino working-class neighborhood in San Bernardino, California, Romo was a pro-civil rights Goldwater supporter and president of his local Young Republicans club. He enlisted in the Army in January 1966, and served in Vietnam from July 1967 to April 1968. Steadfastly religious, he went to Vietnam thinking “I was going...to save my Catholic brothers and kill communists who were the new Nazis of the world.”⁷⁹ Bitter fighting planted the seeds of disillusionment in him, a process finally clinched by the tragic death of his beloved nephew and fellow infantryman, Robert Romo, following a firefight. Relieved to have survived combat, he accepted his discharge in July 1969, and enrolled at San Bernardino Valley Community College where, with the help of some encouraging friends, he started to reevaluate the war. “They were making me face my own contradictions,” he recalled.⁸⁰ Nixon’s invasion

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Kerry and VVAW, *New Soldier*, 100-101.

⁷⁹ Barry Romo, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 33, 34.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 120-122.

into Cambodia made his commitment to a life of activism official. In 1971 he flew to Detroit to testify at the Winter Soldier Investigation. It was his first encounter with VVAW before joining its national steering committee as a regional coordinator. During the planning stages for Dewey Canyon III, he spoke critically of Kerry's lobbying initiative: "I didn't believe in lobbying at this point," he said. "I thought they [elected officials] were all scum. They would only move when we forced them to move."⁸¹

Romo arrived in Washington with others from California equally determined to make their presence felt. Immediately, they hung an upside-down American flag, the international symbol for distress, inside the West Potomac Park encampment.⁸² It was a defining statement signifying the California cadre's no-nonsense attitude. "We were incredibly militant," remembered Bill Branson, a former Army intercept operator. "We figured if we were going to go all the way out there to Washington, to the belly of the beast, we were going to kick some ass."⁸³ Branson enlisted in the military in March 1966 to acquire technical training, and spent eighteen months in Panama before going to Vietnam. Stationed in Phu Bai, just south of Hue, he worked twelve-hour days monitoring the surrounding area from a radio in an air-conditioned office. In his free time he drank and sang Bob Dylan songs with others on the barracks steps.⁸⁴ Despite such luxuries, he found military culture stifling. "When you get in a big bureaucracy you get so that you hate it so bad," Branson said. "The Army was just as fucked-up as anyplace. I saw so many incompetent fools as officers and NCOs [noncommissioned officers]. It's like you don't know what's going on. It's just wrong. Not necessarily morally wrong, just fucked-up wrong,

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 246-247.

⁸² *Going Upriver: The Long War of John Kerry*, DVD, prod. and dir. George Butler (New York: Non-Fiction Films, 2004).

⁸³ Bill Branson, *Winter Soldiers*, 243.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 47, 49, 160-161.

just incompetently wrong.”⁸⁵ He carried this antiestablishment attitude with him to VVAW after his discharge in May 1969.

Tensions simmered as the national office tried its best to manage the uncompromising attitudes of its radicals. The prospect of persuading Congress to end the war through grassroots mobilization motivated VVAW in Washington, but where men like Kerry hoped to find progressive allies in government, an increasing number of VVAWers looked to break with it altogether, rejecting state authority through more shocking displays of guerrilla theater crossed with civil disobedience. Anxious to stir up publicity, a group of fifty veterans from California marched down to the Pentagon to turn themselves in as war criminals.⁸⁶ The next morning, an even larger contingent rallied outside the Supreme Court to demand it rule on the war’s constitutionality. Together they sang patriotic hymns and recited the Pledge of Allegiance as a demonstration of their national loyalty. When over one hundred were arrested for disorderly conduct, they walked off the steps with their hands behind their heads, resembling prisoners of war.⁸⁷

The introduction of more aggressive forms of street protest had a reinvigorating quality to it, offering a striking example for those discouraged veterans left bitter after two days of lobbying. Symbolically, it became a way for VVAWers to circumvent an unresponsive political system and assert themselves as legitimate political actors in Washington. Their stand against a court-ordered injunction requested by the Interior Department on April 16, banning VVAW from camping in Potomac Park, perhaps best exemplified this power. Keeping with their original intent of making Dewey Canyon III a respectful protest, VVAW first challenged the injunction

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁸⁷ William L. Claiborne, “Police Move Quickly, Gently In Arresting Protesting Vets,” *Washington Post*, April 23, 1971.

by petitioning the Washington District Court of Appeals.⁸⁸ Siding in its favor, the court lifted the ban only to have it abruptly reinstated on Tuesday, April 20, two days after the veterans' arrival, by Chief Justice Warren Burger, acting in his capacity as a circuit judge for the District of Columbia. VVAW now had until 4:30 PM the following day to vacate the area.⁸⁹ In a last ditch effort to once more overturn the decision, VVAW's legal counsel, former Attorney General Ramsey Clark, appealed to the full Supreme Court which offered the veterans a choice: "Stay on the Mall, don't sleep, and the government won't arrest you; or sleep on the Mall and the government will arrest you."⁹⁰ At 5:30, Wednesday evening, Clark relayed the message to the anxious crowd waiting in Potomac Park.

VVAW broke into state delegations to deliberate before putting the decision to a vote. For the next two hours Kerry and Hubbard moderated as each side presented its case. "It was real democracy in action," Jan Barry remembered. "It was astounding."⁹¹ The final vote was 480 to 400 in favor of sleeping on the Mall. It was a narrow decision, reflecting the continued strength of moderates in VVAW, but while the vote was non-binding, the minority willingly complied with the majority's decision. The choice of holding a mass meeting filled with robust dialogue and debate to determine whether to defy the courts was consistent with VVAW's localist convictions. Having been rebuked first by Congress and then the Supreme Court, the veterans countered with their own parallel assembly, undermining the legislature and judiciary's authority, and reaffirming their democratic agency. At 10:00 PM, the veterans were informed there would be no arrests. The order came from Nixon himself, whose staff feared the political consequences of such a move. Euphoric, Barry crystallized the significance of the standoff,

⁸⁸ "Antiwar 'Sleep-in' at Washington Monument Is Barred," *New York Times*, April 17, 1971.

⁸⁹ James M. Naughton, "Burger Prohibits Camping on Mall," *New York Times*, April 21, 1971.

⁹⁰ Kerry and VVAW, *New Soldier*, 29.

⁹¹ Barry, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 248.

telling a reporter, “At minimum we showed that the Supreme Court, the executive branch and the Congress are irrelevant. By defying the Supreme Court, we showed that the entire structure of the government is irrelevant.”⁹²

All week long VVAW dominated the headlines, yet its greatest feat came on Friday, April 23, its final day in Washington. At ten o’clock in the morning an estimated crowd of 600 to 1,000 veterans gathered near the Capitol’s west front to return their medals, ribbons, and citations in protest. Crowds of supporters and journalists huddled together around a makeshift fence constructed to protect the Capitol in anticipation of a separate antiwar demonstration scheduled for the following day. Originally, the organizers planned on returning the medals in a black body bag. A last-minute decision to throw them onto the Capitol steps, however, made for a much more provocative statement.⁹³ One by one the veterans stepped forward to toss their decorations over the partition. A microphone sat perched for those who wished to say a few words. Jack Smith, a former Marine sergeant from Connecticut, set the tone for the demonstration as the first veteran in line: “We now strip ourselves of the medals of courage and heroism...those citations for gallantry and exemplary service....We cast these away as symbols of shame, dishonor, and inhumanity.”⁹⁴ Those who followed gave voice to their own feelings of rage, sorrow, and repentance. “I got a Purple Heart here. I hope I get another one fighting these motherfuckers,” Peter Branagan declared. “Here’s my merit badges for murder...from the country that I betrayed by enlisting in the U.S. Army,” yelled another. Others were more restrained. “This [a medal] don’t hide scars. And this [another medal] don’t hide guilt,” said one participant before tossing them over the fence. Another vet simply “pray[ed] that time will

⁹² Goldberg, “Vietnam Vets,” 14.

⁹³ Hubbard, “The Winter Soldier Offensive (Phase-3),” 4; Barry and Romo, interviews, *Winter Soldiers*, 249.

⁹⁴ Goldberg, “Vietnam Vets,” 13-14.

forgive me and my brothers for what we did.” Further down the line, Igor Brovosky of New York City pitched a handful of medals into the heap then whispered, “I’m keeping two Purple Hearts in memory of friends.”⁹⁵

The demonstration proceeded like this for nearly two hours. By its end, a total of fourteen Navy and Distinguished Services Crosses, more than one hundred Silver Stars, and over a thousand Purple Hearts were left scattered in front of a statue memorializing Chief Justice John Marshal.⁹⁶ The resulting pile signaled the depth of the veterans’ disillusionment with government. The decorations they discarded were honors conferred upon them by the state in recognition of their sacrifice in serving on its behalf. In throwing them away they looked to recast and complicate their reputations as heroes by severing their bonds with the very institutions that had propelled them into Vietnam in the first place. In the words of Rusty Sachs, who cast away two medals in dedication to his fallen comrades, it was “the final act of contempt for the way the executive branch is forcing us to wage war.”⁹⁷

VVAW finally found a national audience with Dewey Canyon III. For five days newspapers ran dramatic headlines updating their readers on the historic happening. “1,200 veterans march on Capitol.” “Antiwar Veterans Wake Up the Nation.” “Vet Amputee Fights to End Bloodshed.” “Vets Storm Hill With Toy Guns.”⁹⁸ On television, footage of John Kerry’s speech to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee received a five minute spot on the national news, while the three leading networks kept viewers abreast of daily events.⁹⁹ Thrilled with such publicity, the

⁹⁵ Quotations from Patrick Owens, “A Garbage Heap of Honor,” *Newsday*, April 24, 1971; Moser, *New Winter Soldiers*, 113.

⁹⁶ Owens, “Garbage Heap.”

⁹⁷ Kerry and VVAW, *New Soldier*, 142.

⁹⁸ “Dewey Canyon III,” newspaper collage, n.d. (1971), Box 8, Folder 12, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁹⁹ *Going Upriver*. See also Harmon, *Found, Featured, then Forgotten*, 57-68.

veterans were quick to point out the distinctiveness of Dewey Canyon III. “We came down here and ignored most Movement traditions,” Jan Barry told a reporter. “We were neither trashers, passive marchers, nor the usual nonviolent civil disobedience types. We followed our own instincts and did things our own way.... Nobody has ever come down here and run around through Congress in old grubby clothing, waving toy guns, the way we did, nor have people dared [to] say what we’ve said.”¹⁰⁰

Newspapers representing the voices of middle America echoed Barry’s sentiments. The New Kensington, Pennsylvania, *Daily Dispatch* called Dewey Canyon III “the most effective of all peace demonstrations Washington has seen.”¹⁰¹ The *Akron Beacon Journal*, reflecting on the five-day protest, editorialized, “Whatever one’s views may be of the necessity or the folly of this costly war, it is sobering to witness the bitter repentance of men who have directly participated often with distinction.”¹⁰² Not even the conservative *Augusta Herald* could fully denounce the veterans. “We can’t say that we approve of what the Vietnam Veterans Against the War have to say about ‘peace now’ and a precipitate pullout from Indochina, or think too highly of the theatrics indulged in as part of their protest demonstration in Washington,” the paper opined. “But if anybody at all in this country has a right to register a protest in the streets (a ‘right’ abused time and again beyond condoning) the men who have borne the brunt of battle have it. It has been bought and paid for.”¹⁰³ National publications, like *Time* and *Newsweek*, took equal notice, running separate summaries following the event’s conclusion.¹⁰⁴

To combat such favorable publicity, the Nixon administration went on the offensive early in the week making the specious accusation that only 30 percent of Dewey Canyon III

¹⁰⁰ Goldberg, “Vietnam Vets,” 14.

¹⁰¹ “The Veterans’ Crusade,” *Daily Dispatch*, April 21, 1971.

¹⁰² “Men of Conscience,” *Akron Beacon Journal*, April 26, 1971.

¹⁰³ “Vets’ March Out of Step,” *Augusta Herald*, April 22, 1971.

¹⁰⁴ See “Protest: A Week Against the War,” *Time*, May 3, 1971, 10-13; “Once More,” *Newsweek*, 24-25.

participants were actual Vietnam veterans. Nine hundred angry vets turned in their DD-214 service cards to the press for verification and to discredit the president.¹⁰⁵ Their efforts were momentarily threatened when news broke late Thursday evening on the *NBC Nightly News* that Al Hubbard, VVAW's executive secretary, had lied about his rank. NBC News Washington Bureau Chief, Frank Jordan, had been tipped off about the discrepancy by sources in the Pentagon and confronted Hubbard that night in a telephone conversation. Hubbard confessed to Jordan that despite claims to the contrary, he had never been an Air Force captain; rather, he never rose above the rank of staff sergeant E-5.¹⁰⁶ Serious questions were also raised as to whether Hubbard had ever spent time in Vietnam and the nature of his injuries in the Air Force.¹⁰⁷ In speaking with Jordan, Hubbard explained why he misrepresented his rank. "He was concerned no one would listen to a black man who was also an enlisted man," Jordan said.¹⁰⁸ Publicly, VVAWers close to Hubbard defended his reputation. "I don't really care whether Al was in Vietnam or not," Scott Moore said. "He's a good man. That's all that counts."¹⁰⁹ Privately they were vexed. A few even wondered if his actions were "part of something that was deliberately done to discredit us," recalled Barry.¹¹⁰ Such fears were not unreasonable given the White House's previous claims regarding the veterans' authenticity. In this context, national officers considered censuring Hubbard to protect VVAW's integrity, though proponents of forbearance prevailed. Aside from a few reports, the story fizzled out, as did Hubbard's presence

¹⁰⁵ "Protest," *Time*, 12.

¹⁰⁶ Overend, "Who Is Al Hubbard?" 589.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 589, 607. Whether Hubbard spent time in Vietnam is still undetermined. At the time of the scandal, the Defense Department, when questioned, indicated it was possible that Hubbard served in Vietnam prior to his discharge in October 1966, bringing supplies into the country, but said they could not confirm it. Defense Department officials did, however, express considerable doubt regarding Hubbard's claim to have been injured in an airplane crash in Danang, saying, "As far as we know there is no record of his having been involved in a plane crash ever in Vietnam. If he had been, and he'd been seriously hurt, he would have been in a military hospital in Danang. And it would have shown up in our records." Hubbard, in the incident's aftermath, remained cagey about the issue, and declined requests seeking clarification. See *ibid.*, 589.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 589.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 607.

¹¹⁰ Barry, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 249-250.

in VVAW. He would continue on in his capacity as executive secretary for another year, but as the group became less unified his influence, like that of others in the national office, waned.¹¹¹

If the decision to hold Dewey Canyon III in the nation's capital belied VVAW's decentralized gospel, the event's pluralism bolstered it. VVAW's politics varied as part of a continuum in the early 1970s ranging from moderates to militants with the greatest number floating between the two poles. What bonded this disparate group together, beyond a mutual pledge to end the war, was a distinctive antiwar Vietnam veterans' culture rooted in the organization's cultural politics of guerrilla street theater, countercultural imagery, and the antistatist conviction that government needed to be reined in and made more accountable. How VVAWers understood antistatism varied based on temperament, background, and politics. At Dewey Canyon III, moderates, such as Kerry, aimed to achieve such goals by emboldening progressives in Congress to reclaim their institution's war-making power from an increasingly centralized executive office whose authority had grown steadily since the 1930s. Those on the opposite end of the spectrum, the radicals, by contrast, came to Washington to shock the public out of its inertia and "spit in [the] eye" of authority. "I was for anything that was going to kick ass," said Bill Branson. "I really didn't care what it was. I wasn't going to set anything on fire. Short of that, I was there to make an impression."¹¹²

In the middle between these two extremities stood men like VVAW president Jan Barry. Less sanguine than some about the prospect of lobbying, Barry, nevertheless, viewed abrasive displays of civil disobedience with apprehension. "I was torn," he later said reflecting on the decision to sleep on the Mall. "I was always a very conservative person when it came to

¹¹¹ Since John Kerry's 2004 presidential run the issue surrounding Hubbard's relationship with VVAW has been much more contentious. Conservative pundits and bloggers have used his lie to lend credence to their fallacious claims that the vast majority of VVAWers never served in Vietnam. It is worth noting that of the all men associated with VVAW over the years, Hubbard is the only one to have been exposed for misrepresentation.

¹¹² Branson, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 245.

tweaking the nose of the law. I saw no purpose in spending any time in jail whatsoever.”¹¹³ In this he agreed with Kerry who worried that more arrests like the one outside the Supreme Court Thursday morning “will defeat the purpose of why we’re here. If all our guys get arrested,” he argued, “the camp will split.”¹¹⁴ Yet unlike the moderate Kerry, Barry was more of a radical individualist; a modern-day Jeffersonian moved by “the force of ideas” not political “power plays.”¹¹⁵ While he eschewed those who “wanted to prove that they were ‘radicals,’ or Movement heroes,” by “being busted at least once,” he demonstrated little trust in the state, once writing to those in the national office: “I like governments not at all.”¹¹⁶ Barry’s anarchism is thus telling of a revealing, if somewhat underappreciated, fact about VVAW’s history: no strong correlation existed between being radical and being antistatist — what differed was the degree and expression of such sentiments.

To sustain the momentum achieved at Dewey Canyon III, VVAW chapters followed the national office’s lead and organized their own local Winter Soldier Investigations and Operation RAW-style marches. Members in Colorado, Alabama, Oklahoma, Pittsburgh, New York, and New England, for instance, all developed their own Winter Soldier panels. Some followed the same template used in Detroit; others presented more focused discussions around themes of drugs, the air war, and the “concealment of U.S. casualties in Vietnam.”¹¹⁷ Mock search-and-

¹¹³ Barry, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 248.

¹¹⁴ Claiborne, “Police Move Quickly.”

¹¹⁵ Jan Crumb to the members of VVAW and CCI, December 6, 1970, in author’s possession.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*; Goldberg, “Vietnam Vets,” 14.

¹¹⁷ “Colorado Winter Soldier Investigation,” *1st Casualty*, August 1971, 8; “Information Questionnaire For Proposed September Winter Soldier Investigation,” Box 4, Folder 7; “New England Winter Soldier Investigation,” meeting summary, July 7, 1971, Box 4, Folder 7; “WSI Panel Discussion in Tuscaloosa,” Alabama Vietnam Veterans Against the War Newsletter, n.d. (c. mid-October 1971), 1, Box 2, Folder 20; Gary Straiger, Ohio-Indiana-Kentucky Regional Newsletter #19, October 13, 1972, 6, Box 2, File 34; “WSI on Concealment of US Casualties in Vietnam,” National Steering Committee Meeting Minutes, Yellow Springs, Ohio, December 27-31, 1973, 26, Box 1, Folder 13, VVAW Papers, WSHS. See also SAC, Pittsburgh (100-17356), report to Director, FBI, “Winter Soldiers’ Investigation, October 24, 1971, Sponsored by Pennsylvania Vietnam Veterans Against the War — IS New Left,” November 5, 1971, 1-2; SAC, Oklahoma City (100-8395)-c-, report to Director, FBI, “Regional Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) Convention Sponsored by Oklahoma VVAW, University of

destroy marches were similarly encouraged by the national headquarters which published a how-to guide in the premier issue of its newspaper, *1st Casualty*.¹¹⁸ Most actions mirrored the example set by Operation RAW with some combination of marching and guerrilla theater. In Texas there was Operation Turning the Guns Around. In Pennsylvania: Operation Keystone. For Operation POW, veterans retraced Paul Revere's famous route from Concord, Massachusetts, to Bunker Hill in Boston. No guerrilla theater was performed, but nearly two hundred veterans, including John Kerry, were arrested camping at Lexington Green, location of the first battle of the American Revolution, in an act of civil disobedience. Five months later, in October 1971, VVAWers in Arkansas marched twenty-three miles from Rogers to Fayetteville, staging combat scenarios in various shopping centers along the way.¹¹⁹ These large-scale actions were designed to build bonds between members and educate the public by "bringing the war home."

One of the more elaborate events, Operation Heart of America, took place in Kansas City from July 3 to 5, 1971. Two hundred VVAWers, most hailing from chapters in the South and Midwest, joined together for three days of protest involving guerrilla theater, rap sessions, and a candlelight march.¹²⁰ No site was safe from the throng of demonstrators who began their protest in Lincoln Park and fanned out from there. Other than a brief skirmish with the local police over the veterans' right to march through the streets carrying an upside down American flag, the event

Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma, 11/5-7/71, IS — New Left," November 11, 1971, 3, FBI File No. 100-HQ-448092: PSM Folder [21], Reel 4, FOIA.

¹¹⁸ "Guidelines for VVAW and Guerrilla Theater," *1st Casualty*, August 1971, 6.

¹¹⁹ "Operation Turing the Guns Around," memo to Texas coordinators, August 22, 1971, Box 5, Folder 15; Texas Regional Office, "National VVAW News," n.d. (c. late August 1971), Box 2, Folder 36, VVAW Papers, WSHS; David King, "Paul Revere Had a Horse: The Veterans' March to Boston," *The New Republic*, June 12, 1971, 11-13; "RAW March in Arkansas," Alabama Vietnam Veterans Against the War Newsletter, 1.

¹²⁰ John Upton, letter to the national office requesting monetary support, n.d. (c. June 1971), Box 4, Folder 12; "Tentative Schedule for Operation Heart of America," n.d. (c. June 1971), Box 4, Folder 12, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

proved peaceful.¹²¹ Like Operation RAW and the Winter Soldier Investigation, Operation Heart of America's "limited incursion into...Middle America" focused on rallying the Midwest. Their ambitions were not ill-founded. Distaste for the war had been building in the region. A February 1971 Gallop poll found that 65 percent of Midwesterners wanted to withdraw American troops from Vietnam. Feeling that "the East and West coast[s] have been barraged with antiwar sentiment and Middle America is being neglected," VVAWers aimed to exploit the region's evolving sympathies and draw more into their fold.¹²² "[I]t is a must as well as our duty as VVAW," declared the veterans, "to reach the people of the HEART OF AMERICA with the message of Peace and Change."¹²³

A few months later, in a last ditch effort to pressure President Nixon into declaring a date for American withdrawal from Southeast Asia in 1971, VVAW planned one final protest for the year. Operation Peace on Earth began Christmas Eve and continued for eight days as chapters carried out "simultaneous actions" in cities across the country.¹²⁴ With no centralized body of coordinators directing the event, participants were extended a great deal of latitude in the planning process, much of it performed on an *ad hoc* basis. The demonstration got off to a slow start, finally hitting its stride on December 26 when fifteen veterans "barricaded themselves" in the Statue of Liberty.¹²⁵ Fifteen-minutes after its seizure, at 7:15 PM, news agencies were notified through a series of phone calls placed by VVAW headquarters and the demonstrators inside the statue.¹²⁶ Hubbard promptly issued a statement: "We, as a new generation of men who have

¹²¹ "Argument Over Flag Disrupts Peace March," *Ada Weekly News* (Oklahoma), July 8, 1971; Saunders, *Combat by Trial*, 149-151.

¹²² "It's a National Weariness," *Bakersfield Californian*, July 4, 1971.

¹²³ Upton, letter to national office.

¹²⁴ Operation Peace on Earth, tentative schedule, n.d. (c. December 1971), Box 13, Folder 5, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹²⁵ According to Nancy Miller Saunders, VVAWers at Valley Forge and in Killeen, Texas, were beset by a series of problems related to poor planning, bad luck, and FBI subterfuge. See Saunders, *Combat by Trial*, 218-220.

¹²⁶ Robert D. McFadden, "War Foes Seize Statue of Liberty," *New York Times*, December 27, 1971.

survived Vietnam, are taking this symbolic action at the Statue of Liberty in an effort to show support for any person who refuses to kill.” Two upside down American flags were hung from the torch and crown to symbolize the veterans’ distress.¹²⁷

Just as guerrilla theater and civil disobedience energized the veterans’ spirits at Dewey Canyon III, so too did they reinvigorate the sputtering pace of Operation Peace on Earth. Small groups of veterans, acting peacefully and autonomously, responded to the occupation in like fashion, apprehending a National Guard office in Hartford, Connecticut, the Betsy Ross House in Philadelphia, and the South Vietnamese Consulate in San Francisco.¹²⁸ On December 28, 150 demonstrators went to Washington, D.C. Thirty laid down in body bags outside the White House gates and were doused with blood donated by veterans to symbolize the war dead. A larger contingent moved to the Lincoln Memorial and spontaneously took control of its steps. Each one of the week’s actions ended nonviolently, including the Statue of Liberty occupation which concluded after forty-one hours. No arrests were made.¹²⁹

The introduction of guerrilla theater in VVAW fit well with the group’s evolving identity in the years from 1970 to 1971. In addition to grabbing headlines, veterans employed the technique to raise the electorate’s consciousness by revealing to them the uncomfortable truths about combat and military policy. “Most Americans are shocked by the isolated reports of atrocities and blame only the individual soldiers involved,” VVAW said. “We believe, however, that true blame lies at this time with President Nixon, the Joint Chiefs, [Defense Secretary] Melvin Laird, high

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* See also, Jim Murphy, “Recollections: Statue of Liberty Xmas 1971,” *The Veteran*, Spring 2009, 44, 42.

¹²⁸ “Statue of Liberty Play,” *Newsweek*, January 10, 1971, 20.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 20; Saunders, *Combat by Trial*, 220-225.

ranking military officials, and those who remain silent or profit from war.”¹³⁰ This position, consistent with the view of the wider antiwar movement, was not novel in the early 1970s. Its articulation through the medium of guerrilla theater by a group of antiwar Vietnam veterans, however, was. With guerrilla theater, VVAWers sought to convey their wartime experiences by forcibly reconfiguring the public’s proximity to the conflict. Broadcast news and print journalism could only go so far in relaying the truths of warfare. VVAW’s guerrilla theater performances thus aimed to bridge the gap between reality and representation by upending the traditional barriers that separated the performers from their audience. As a mode of activism, these caustic and emotionally wrought recitals offered a visual reimagining of the war’s brutality, one which identified, sometimes more explicitly than others, top-ranking Washington authorities as the chief culprits responsible for implementing atrocity-inducing policies. Rather than depicting government as a natural instrument for solving complex problems, VVAW inveighed against it as a dangerously ineffectual source of interference and destruction in Vietnam.

After 1971, guerrilla theater became a less dominant feature of VVAW’s demonstrations. This was more a result of the organization’s search for new strategies of change than a rejection of its cultural politics. At the same time as VVAWers doubled down on the strategy of guerrilla theater, some in the organization began experimenting with other countercultural practices. “[Guerrilla theater]’s very visual and it’s a way of getting people’s attention,” Jan Barry explained. “Whether anything changes I don’t know because you have to do the additional organizing.”¹³¹ For members like Barry, who viewed large demonstrations as useful but not ends in themselves, this was a given. “It took six months to organize these monsters,” he said. “I was much more interested in: Where can I go and talk to two, or three, or four conservatives, and

¹³⁰ “Operation RAW: Why We Are Marching.”

¹³¹ Barry, interview with author, October 30, 2013.

change their mind?”¹³² As the war continued, concerns about the social conditions facing Vietnam veterans on the home front — addiction, unemployment, post-traumatic stress — became an area of increasing priority for VVAW. Sensing that the government had neither the capital nor the will to adequately address these issues, chapters responded with their own grassroots solutions, echoing the many cooperative enterprises organized by hippies and leftists in the late 1960s and 1970s to create spontaneous countercultural environments free of alienating bureaucracy and top-down authority.

¹³² Barry, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 198.

CHAPTER THREE

Back at War

As a demonstration, Dewey Canyon III propelled VVAW into the vanguard of the antiwar movement. Its assorted blend of anger, irreverence, and pathos made it the ultimate act of bearing witness to the death and destruction caused by American intervention in Vietnam. The war did not cease after Dewey Canyon III but the country had changed; its consciousness had been raised and demands for withdrawal strengthened.¹ As public opinion evolved so too did VVAW. After Dewey Canyon III, members continued to identify less and less with those in the national office. Regional development and local chapter initiatives dominated VVAW's agenda, following a trend set in the latter half of the sixties decade toward the creation of expressive countercultural enclaves that "sought to engage and influence the society they had, at least in some sense, repudiated."² The postwar liberal state did much to encourage this change in focus as VVAWers turned their attention to the home front and the tragic conditions wrought by the over-bureaucratized, federally-run Veterans Administration (VA). Already suspicious of government authority, the veterans' antistatism intensified as they searched for alternative, anti-hierarchical methods of healing predicated on the principles of decentralism and liberation. Once seen as a moment of declension by some in the organization, the aftermath of Dewey Canyon III, in retrospect, reads as a period of extraordinary creativity.

* * *

¹ A May 1971 Gallup poll showed that 61 percent of the country thought sending troops to fight in Vietnam was a mistake, the strongest showing of antiwar sentiment recorded by Gallup in the Vietnam Era. See Gillespie, "Americans Look Back at Vietnam War," *Gallup*, <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/2299/americans-look-back-vietnam-war.aspx>> (accessed 9 March 2013).

² Farber, "Building the Counterculture," 3.

By mid-1971 VVAW was a force unto itself. Across the country new chapters emerged, each one determined to operate on its own terms. Much of this owed to VVAW's regional diversity. With pockets of supporters in such varied locations as Alaska, Alabama, Texas, and Connecticut, what worked for one chapter did not necessarily translate to another. In southern California, where a number of chapters existed in relative close proximity, members congregated around a strong sense of unity and operated like a collective.³ VVAWers in Texas, Maryland, and Ohio, too, adapted to their own surroundings, making nearby military bases centers of recruitment and activism, while members in Santa Cruz County formed the Veterans Cooperative in coalition with other local antiwar veteran groups.⁴ Collective leadership was a common theme among chapters. In 1971, the entire state of Connecticut decentralized its operating structure to make local coordinators the chief policymakers, and the state office in New Haven a clearinghouse for information. The Philadelphia chapter broke down the division of labor into small committees with the anticipation that they would "wither away" in the future. Meanwhile, the Minnesota state chapter took an alternative approach by coordinating its power in a State Executive Committee.⁵ Members, by and large, took such pluralism as a given. "VVAW reflects the communities it's in," remarked the Wisconsin state organizer John Lindquist. Neighboring chapters like "Chicago and Milwaukee aren't the same. They're good and nice, but they're different," he said.⁶

How a chapter developed depended on its political milieu. Most southern chapters, for instance, lamented the difficulties of organizing in such conservative states and turned to the

³ Branson, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 268.

⁴ Wetzler and John Kniffin, interviews, *Winter Soldiers*, 227; "DVAW Newsletter #4," November 1971, 2, 3, Box 5, Folder 6; *Veterans Co-op Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (1 May 1974), 1, Box 3, Folder 14, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁵ "Vietnam Veterans Against the War Connecticut Office, Newsletter #2," n.d. (early 1971), 2, Box 3, Folder 14; "Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Philadelphia Newsletter," March 1972, 4-5, Box 5, Folder 10; Bob Evans, "State Executive Committee," *Minnesota Homefront Sniper* 1, no. 1 (August 1971), 5-6, Box 4, Folder 10, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁶ John Lindquist, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 291.

electoral process as the most promising strategy for change. In the liberal enclave of Athens, Georgia, VVAW established a progressive “student-labor-black” coalition to build support for potential peace candidates. The Oklahoma chapter submitted antiwar motions to the Tulsa city council. In Alabama, VVAW ran its members for municipal office and for state delegates to the Democratic National Convention.⁷ Even outside the South, political conservatism presented obstacles. Veterans in New Hampshire reported the difficulties of “trying to get a whole bunch of people together.” “N[ew] H[ampshire] is a pretty reactionary state,” commented VVAW’s Rudolph Bourget. There are “[a] lot of liberals & moderates up here, but [they] are a little timid.”⁸ To publicize its message, the New Hampshire chapter gave radio interviews, handed out leaflets, organized movie nights, and petitioned the state government.⁹ Chapters in Texas, California, New York, and Ohio, by contrast, proved much more rebellious, drawing strength from dissident GIs on neighboring military bases and the larger activist communities they were part of. Given this diversity, VVAWers commonly identified more strongly with the region or community they were situated in than the organization as a whole.

In 1971, tensions escalated between national and regional coordinators. Chapters operating outside the New York City orbit reported feeling disconnected and underappreciated by their peers in the national office. Brian Adams of Denver spoke for many VVAWers when he criticized headquarters for being “hung up to a large degree in New York politics and...not

⁷ Georgia Regional Coordinator Chuck Searcy to the National Office, March 24, 1972, Box 3, Folder 23; Tulsa Resolution on Vietnam Air War, n.d. (c. 1971), Box 5, Folder 7; Letter from Tom Ashby, Alabama-Mississippi Regional Coordinator, May 3, 1972, Box 2, Folder 20; “Alabama-Mississippi Region Newsletter #18,” n.d. (c. 1972), 1, Box 2, Folder 20; Tuscaloosa County Sample Ballot, n.d. (1972), Box 2, Folder 20, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁸ Rudolph Bourget to the New Hampshire Vietnam Veterans Against the War chapter, July 14, 1971, Box 4, Folder 18, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁹ *Ibid*; Rudolph Bourget and Olin Ingham to the citizens of New Hampshire, n.d. (June 1971), Box 4, Folder 18, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

understand[ing] the problems of the field.”¹⁰ The national office’s perceived insistence that “Southern and Midwestern chapters be run like those in the Northeast” ignored the inherent difficulties of “southern-style organizing,” observed Nancy Miller Saunders, an active VVAW supporter in the South. It also gave credence to the growing feeling “that National, with the support from the larger regions in the East, kept railroading through plans that did not work in the Midwest and South.”¹¹ In Washington, D.C., the local VVAW chapter considered taking action and started to “talk about splitting from the organization and forming a District of Columbia Veteran’s Coalition (D.C.V.C)” owing to its faltering relations with New York.¹² The Texas members were just as brazen. In a scathing letter of protest written to the national office, the Fort Hood-Killeen chapter accused the politically moderate coordinator John Kerry of “influencing the policies of all VVAW chapters” toward a “middle-class orientated” position. Demanding his resignation, they threatened to withdraw from VVAW until he was replaced on the national steering committee by someone with a working-class background who better “reflect[ed] the true militancy of the veterans’ movement.”¹³

VVAW’s radicalism, like the organization itself, was *ad hoc* and unfocused. Apart from espousing an unequivocal antiwar message, VVAWers were bound to no specific ideology. Sheldon Ramsdell, one of the few holdovers from VVAW’s early days, reflected on this fact many years later. “[W]e had no political philosophy; it was just a mixed bag of rednecks all the way to Maoists,” he said.¹⁴ Some began reading the works of Marx, Lenin, Mao, and Kim Il Sung, exploring topics of Marxism and socialism in college; others wanted nothing to do with it.

¹⁰ Craig Scott Moore, “A Report to the Executive Committee of VVAW Concerning a Month’s Trip to the Field and Other Observations,” n.d. (c. August 1971), 3, Box 1, Folder 5, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹¹ Saunders, *Combat by Trial*, 202.

¹² Rod Kane, *Veteran’s Day* (New York: Orion Books, 1990), 134.

¹³ “A Statement From the Fort Hood-Killeen Chapter of the Texas VVAW,” n.d. (1971), Box 2, Folder 26, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹⁴ Ramsdell, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 293.

“There was an honest element in VVAW that was becoming leftist and anti-imperialist.... [But] [n]ot all of us,” Lindquist insisted. “I mean you could sit up and argue with me all night, and I don’t want to hear the word revolution.”¹⁵ Even as a core group of politicians drifted leftward, VVAW’s membership remained a haphazard collection of disaffected liberals, anarchists, Marxists, and counterculture rebels. Most resisted simple categorization, wanting to avoid ideological and associational entanglements altogether. Bobby Muller, a paraplegic vet from Great Neck, New York, spoke to this distrust when asked about his affiliation with VVAW. “I did a lot of national media for VVAW,” he recalled many years later. “But I never joined VVAW. I *represented* VVAW. I’m making a technical point. I just wasn’t joining anything, even VVAW. That’s how I think a lot of us operated. VVAW was, ‘Anarchists unite.’”¹⁶

Chapter coordinators reported the inherent difficulties in organizing such a libertarian base. John Lindquist and his companion, Annie Bailey, ran the Milwaukee chapter. Raised in a white working-class neighborhood on Milwaukee’s west side, Lindquist enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1967 and served in Vietnam from 1968 to 1969. His reasons for joining the armed services were unambiguous: “I wanted to kill communists. I was such a rabid anticommunist that I thought [Joe] McCarthy was my kind of guy.”¹⁷ His attitude changed in boot camp so much so that after landing in Vietnam he garnered the nickname “hippie” for his precipitant antiwar convictions. The “conditions of the Vietnamese people, the racist crap from the guys, [and] the sexual conduct of some of the troops” were too much for Lindquist’s conscience. Following his discharge in August 1969, he burned his uniform and attended the Milwaukee Moratorium demonstration in October.¹⁸ The following March he met Bailey, an antiwar activist who helped

¹⁵ Bobby Muller and Lindquist, interviews, *Winter Soldiers*, 259, 261.

¹⁶ Muller, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 210. Emphasis added.

¹⁷ Lindquist, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 50, 52.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 164-165, 168-170.

smuggle draft resisters across the border into Canada. Together, they joined VVAW in 1971 after hearing about its advertisement in the February issue of *Playboy*. Like scores of other VVAW coordinators, they “discovered early on that Vietnam veterans were militantly antiorganization. The more organized you wanted to be,” Bailey said, “the less response you got.”¹⁹

This unruly spirit animated the group’s preference for regional independence. Chapters in California, New Mexico, Texas, Florida, Wisconsin, Alaska, and New England all found common cause in this pursuit. “VVAW must continue to grow at all levels,” proclaimed a group of New Englanders. “But local and regional autonomy will be the very foundation upon which it will structure itself.”²⁰ Early VVAWers had treated local autonomy as sacrosanct. Yet to a growing number of new members, the organization was still not democratic enough. In its revived state, several chapters worried that decision-making had become, in some instances, too centralized at the national level, prompting them to push back despite recent attempts to democratize the national office with the introduction of the regional coordinator position in February. “There was a sort of elitism in...the national steering committee,” John Kniffin insisted. That it sometimes met in a “closed session...upset a lot of people.”²¹ An ex-combat Marine, Kniffin served thirty-two months in Vietnam before his discharge in 1968. After settling in Houston, he moved to Austin where he worked for Bell Telephone Co. while enrolled at the University of Texas. A self-described “anarchist,” he joined VVAW in the spring of 1971. The following year he took over as the state’s regional coordinator with “a mandate...[to] fight for regional autonomy and a bottom-up power structure.”²² To ensure this aim, the Texas chapters

¹⁹ Anne Bailey, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 75, 273.

²⁰ “New England Statement,” in the appendix of “Minutes for the National Steering Committee Meeting in Denver,” February 18-20, 1972, 7, Box 1, Folder 7, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

²¹ Kniffin, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 294.

²² “Biographical Sketches of Defendants,” part of a press package titled “Nixon Administration Attempts to Destroy VVAW,” n.d. (1972), Box 22, Folder 28, VVAW Papers, WSHS; Kniffin, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 294.

“went as a delegation” to national steering committee meetings, he recalled. “If we voted on something, we would caucus and we would arbitrate, and then we would vote.”²³

The introduction of such militancy into VVAW shocked some of the group’s longer serving members, including Jan Barry, who looked back on it with some misgivings. “As these chapters popped up, there was all this resentment that ‘Somebody [in the national office] is telling us what to do.’ But there was virtually no recognition [within the organization] that people were overreacting. We were not the military,” he stated in reference to VVAW’s anti-hierarchical structure. “[In fact,] I was the mildest leader of a national organization anybody could imagine. I would say, ‘You got a better idea. Convince other people [and] go with it.’”²⁴ In truth, exponents of this heightened radicalism were likely rebelling less against Barry and his *laissez-faire* leadership style than others on the national steering committee. John Kerry, for one, bore the brunt of much rank-and-file enmity after Dewey Canyon III on charges that he was “using the organization to further his political career.”²⁵ VVAW’s executive secretary, Al Hubbard, likewise, continued to be a source of controversy. In addition to lying about his military record, his insistence on running the organization on his terms, and reluctance to “share the power he thought he had with anyone else,” made him a divisive figure. And then there were the masses of veterans for whom even the mere suggestion of authority prompted objection; vets “looking for direction but determined that they would never follow orders again.”²⁶

Given such antiauthoritarianism, internecine conflicts intensified, eventually reaching a boiling point at a national steering committee meeting in Kansas City, scheduled for mid-November. Frustrated with headquarters, a “sergeants’ rebellion” composed primarily of enlisted

²³ Kniffin, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 294.

²⁴ Barry, interview with author, October 30, 2013.

²⁵ Kane, *Veteran’s Day*, 157.

²⁶ Linda Alband, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 304; Saunders, *Combat by Trial*, 205-208, 204.

ex-Marines from the South and Midwest erupted at the gathering “to force the steering committee to listen to their ideas and problems.”²⁷ Sensing this pressure, VVAW leader Skip Roberts proposed on the meeting’s first day, November 12, that he and the other five national officers (who sat on the national steering committee alongside the twenty-six regional coordinators) step down to make way for new blood. The motion lost by two votes, but the matter persisted.²⁸ The next day, at an open meeting, members of the sergeants’ rebellion petitioned to further decentralize the power of the regional coordinator position and redistribute its responsibilities to better represent those at the state and local levels. The Detroit delegates were especially vocal in this demand, as many expressed frustration that they did not share the same “voting power as the Michigan regional coordinator.”²⁹ In this contentious atmosphere, several national leaders resigned. Kerry, VVAW’s most recognized member, announced his decision in Kansas City.³⁰ Always uncomfortable in radical circles, he cited “personality conflicts and differences in political philosophy” as sources of his disaffection.³¹ He was joined by Scott Moore, Mike Oliver, and Jan Barry, who withdrew from the organization he co-founded a few months earlier out of fatigue.³² The loss of such leadership proved immense. All four men

²⁷ Saunders, *Combat by Trial*, 202-205, 210.

²⁸ Gerald Nicosia, “Veteran in Conflict,” *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, May 23, 2004, 6, <<http://articles.latimes.com/2004/may23/magazine/tm-kerry21a>> (accessed 13 March 2014).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁰ There has long been some dispute over when exactly John Kerry resigned from VVAW; specifically, whether it was before, after, or during the chaotic national steering committee meeting in Kansas City. Much of the controversy revolves around whether Kerry was present during a discussion at which Scott Camil, coordinator for the Florida-Alabama-Mississippi region, introduced a plan to assassinate members of Congress as part of a strategy to bring the war to an end. While Kerry has said he does not remember attending the Kansas City meeting, Gerald Nicosia, relying on FBI documents and oral histories, has determined rather convincingly that he was in fact present and at the session where Camil announced his now infamous “Phoenix Plan.” Like most VVAWers, however, Kerry overwhelmingly favored keeping the organization nonviolent. See, *Ibid.* For more on Camil and the Phoenix Plan, see to Chapter Five.

³¹ Brinkley, *Tour of Duty*, 402-407.

³² While Kerry, Moore, and Barry all left VVAW following their resignations from the national office, Oliver, it should be noted, continued on as an active member in the San Francisco chapter. Barry, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 258; Moore, “Report to the Executive Committee,” 5; Minutes from the National Steering Committee Meeting in Kansas City [November 12-14], December 10, 1971, Box 1, Folder 6, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

brought attributes to the national office not easily replaced. But it also signaled a new chapter in VVAW's history, one that saw the center of power shift from the New York headquarters back to individual chapters, and with it, a renewed focus on community activism.

At the same time as VVAWers concentrated on the strategy of guerrilla theater in the wake of Dewey Canyon III, many in the organization began experimenting with other counterculture practices. VVAW continued to plan and execute political demonstrations, both locally and nationally, and, in time, became more outspoken in its criticisms about the war's imperialist dynamics, only now chapters did so with an eye toward deepening the group's commitment to community activism. VVAW's affinity for local, grassroots organizing stood as a core pillar of its identity. While its antiwar demonstrations have received the bulk of scholarly attention, community activism on the home front remains the common denominator running throughout its history. "I think from the beginning, the main interest in the back of our minds was problems at home," said Sheldon Ramsdell. Early on we realized "[t]here's more involved than just stopping the war. It's working-class kids, coming home totally fucked-up, [who] can't believe in their government anymore."³³ VVAWers in the late 1960s gave voice to such concerns in their determined efforts to reach out to veterans who felt adrift and disillusioned. Empathy, respect, and dialogue had been their guiding principles as they made it their mission to connect with all Vietnam era vets, including conservatives who still supported the war.³⁴ In the 1970s, VVAW built on this example by zeroing in on the structural problems keeping veterans down.

That VVAW could move so seamlessly between antiwar protest and community activism was in part a tribute to Jan Barry and his aversion to top-down policy making. "If you've got a

³³ Ramsdell, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 259.

³⁴ Chevigny, "Farwell to Arms," 56.

good idea, go with it,” was his leadership philosophy. “This is why all kinds of projects emerged,” he later insisted. “I didn’t come up with those ideas. I encouraged people to go with the ideas that they came up with and then convince other people that this is a good idea and organize along those lines.”³⁵ Few thrived under these conditions and nudged VVAW in the direction of community organizing more than Al Hubbard. Older than most members, Hubbard brought with him a creative energy that stretched the organization’s limits. Aware that the war’s problems were not confined to the battlefield he pushed VVAW to address domestic concerns as well. By the summer of 1970, he and others in the New York office had identified “[f]ree speech for Vietnam veterans and GIs, improper treatment of wounded Vietnam veterans in VA hospitals, [and] education and psychiatric programs for wounded veterans” as critical issues facing soldiers after their service. More ambitious objectives, like “demanding an end to racism and repression, and the re-ordering of national priorities throughout the society,” were also enunciated.³⁶ Under Hubbard’s influence, VVAW turned toward community activism as the best forum for addressing these concerns. The veterans started small, in New York City, organizing a public hearing on drug addiction in the military in early 1970, and campaigned to reopen “closed up rent controlled apartments” to create more affordable housing for veterans.³⁷ From there, in the aftermath of Dewey Canyon III, they expanded their operations to supplement and improve upon those services offered to them by the state through the Veterans Administration.

For the next several years, VVAW poured its energy into subverting, and where possible, reforming the VA. A massive operation in its own right, the VA oversaw seventy-five separate benefit programs ranging from pension payments and education loans to home mortgages and

³⁵ Barry, interview with author, October 30, 2013.

³⁶ “Facts and Background,” organizational profile, n.d. (c. summer 1970), in author’s possession

³⁷ “Minutes of Meeting on Saturday, January 24th,” n.d. [1970], Box 1, Folder 6, VVAW Papers, WSHS; Nicosia, *Home to War*, 55.

health care, its primary service. Properly established by Congress in 1930 to provide assistance to eligible veterans, the VA went from being one of several new government agencies created during the Great Depression to one of the nation's largest federal bureaucracies in the 1970s. Commanding a budget of \$20.3 billion by the decade's end, the agency employed nearly a quarter of a million full-time physicians, dentists, nurses, medical residents, technicians, and administrators to meet the annual health care needs of some 2.5 million veterans.³⁸ The central objective governing VA services corresponded with those underlining values associated with the New Deal and postwar liberal order: that the state had an obligation to provide security and assistance to the most vulnerable. It was a noble goal; one VVAWers readily agreed with. But the gulf between its stated intentions and its troubling day-to-day operations confirmed their doubts about the efficacy of the postwar state. "The government is a haven for lawyers who tend to be long on rhetoric and legalism but short on thorough analysis and social action," Hubbard wrote in the group's newspaper, *Ist Casualty*. "The government has become enveloped in the mystique of the fine print and things are often not what they seem."³⁹

In 1970, 166 VA hospitals dotted the country treating 800,000 patients a year. Donald Johnson, the agency's director, described it as the best health care system in the country. The endorsement was pure hyperbole. After visiting the Bronx VA facility, Charles Childs, a reporter for *Life* magazine, condemned the sight as "disgracefully understaffed with standards far below those of an average community hospital." Plagued by staff shortages, overcrowding, inadequate funding, exhausting wait times, and abusive negligence, the VA hospital system looked more like "medical slum" than a place of healing, he concluded.⁴⁰ From the patients' perspective it

³⁸ Robert Klein, *Wounded Men, Broken Promises* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1981), 20-22.

³⁹ Al Hubbard, "A Viable VVAW," *Ist Casualty*, August 1971, 2.

⁴⁰ Charles Childs, "Staff Shortages, Overcrowding, Dirt, and Leaky Roofs in a Medical Slum," *Life*, May 22, 1970, 26.

was hell. Mark Dumpert, a quadriplegic Marine injured in Vietnam, likened it to a war zone. “The day they moved me into that gloomy 3-C ward, I knew I was back on the battlefield,” he said. “It was the misery of Khesanh [*sic*] all over again.”⁴¹ Personnel deficiencies aggravated the problem further. During the night shift, one nurse often looked after three wards comprised of 140 patients. In the day, quadriplegic vets waited around in open rooms naked after showers with soiled laundry piled up around them. Neglected urine bags regularly overflowed, spilling and caking onto the floors, as trains of rats tormented the veterans during their sleep. Even the simplest request of draping a sheet over a patient could go unnoticed, forcing veterans to depend on each other for survival. “It’s like you’ve been put in jail or been punished for something,” Dumpert stated.⁴²

The more compassionate VA employees tried their best knowing full well what services they did deliver were typically not enough. With 1,100 fewer staff in VA facilities in 1970 than in 1966, they failed to keep up with the increasing demands. “We’re just not being funded in a way that can adequately give and fulfill our services,” explained Dr. Abraham Kleinman of the Bronx VA. “We can’t take care of patients as we would like.”⁴³ Although the Bronx facility proved particularly notorious, such wretched conditions were characteristic of most VA hospitals. In Miami, new equipment went unused due to lack of training. At the VA facility in Washington, D.C., one nurse cared for over eighty patients at time. Doctors working at the Wadsworth VA hospital in Los Angeles denounced their working conditions as “medieval” and “filthy,” while a nurse in Bath Hurst, New York, characterized the patient care provided as a “dehumanizing process that makes euthanasia look inviting.”⁴⁴ Anticipating this verdict,

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 28, 30-31.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 31, 30.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 26; Klein, *Wounded Men*, 24.

Congress, in December 1969, issued a six month investigation into the VA to assess “whether the Veterans Administration medical program was being properly funded and whether the hospital staffs were adequate to give prompt and proper care to veterans.”⁴⁵ Its findings were dismal: financial cutbacks, staff shortages, deteriorating infrastructures, insufficient training, and bureaucratic confusion all colluded to undermine veteran care. The prognosis likely shocked no one. Aside from a few productive years after the Second World War, administration after administration had left the agency under-funded and grossly mismanaged. President Nixon continued this pattern of negligence by vetoing a 1970 bill containing further appropriations for the VA, whose annual budget as of May 1970 stood at \$1.6 billion — the cost of one month of fighting in Vietnam.⁴⁶

Congressional goodwill notwithstanding, VVAW and the federal legislature exhibited two contrasting strategies for improving VA services. Whereas Congress planned to massage the agency’s crises away with more funding, VVAW posited a complete overhaul of the existing system, making it less bureaucratic and more responsive to the veterans’ needs. Additional appropriations were necessary, insisted VVAW. But it meant nothing unless those systemic problems yoking the VA were likewise considered. Bureaucracy troubled Vietnam veterans the most, prompting many to avoid using the agency’s services until absolutely necessary. “Only 15% of us ever use the V.A. Why? Because the V.A. is a last resort,” VVAW national coordinator Samuel Schorr claimed. “[I]t cares more for red tape than human beings, and it pays more for administrators than it does for doctors.”⁴⁷ Related grievances focused on cutbacks to

⁴⁵ U.S. Representative Roman Pucinski, “Congressman Pucinski Warns Against Crises in Medical Needs for American Veterans,” *Congressional Record* 116, no. 141 (August 14, 1970), found in Box 18, Folder 9, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁴⁶ Klein, *Wounded Men*, 20-65; Pucinski, “Warns Against Crisis”; Childs, “Staff Shortages,” 26.

⁴⁷ This statistic has not been verified. I employ it here, as part of a direct quotation, to demonstrate the degree to which many Vietnam veterans saw the VA as playing a negative role in their lives. Samuel R. Schorr on the Veterans Administration, n.d., Box 18, Folder 8, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

education benefits, lost IBM payment cards, late checks, and reductions to disability pay. “They always try to pass the buck to someone else,” protested another veteran. “You have to go through too many changes to receive *no!* for an answer.”⁴⁸

Patients residing in VA hospitals commonly experienced the worst of this unfeeling bureaucracy. To mitigate these conditions, VVAW interceded to “make hospitalized veterans more aware of the benefits for which they are eligible while in the hospital, and...to expand existing programs to be more responsive to the needs of young veterans.”⁴⁹ How the organization went about executing this agenda varied amongst chapters. A large number performed volunteer work at their local VA facilities, arranging visits, like the St. Louis chapter, to assist patients with routine tasks like “writing letters, reading, and [finding] magazines.” In Long Beach and Los Angeles, VVAWers established an “escort service” to chauffeur “patients around, running errands in the hospital, and just generally helping out.”⁵⁰ Efforts to revamp the VA’s recreational culture received considerable attention as well. In the early 1970s, a disproportionate amount of leisure activities in VA hospitals still catered to World War II and Korean War vets. Where rug hooking, weaving, Bingo, and accordion recitals might have satisfied older residents, they remained decidedly unattractive forms of entertainment to younger veterans whose interests more closely paralleled the sixties’ counterculture. To accommodate this, VVAWers in Orange County, Oklahoma City, and Milwaukee organized on-site concerts and dance parties for patients, while members of the Dayton, Ohio, chapter formed their own veterans lounge at the local VA where “the younger Vets” could “come and play their Acid Rock without getting into a hassle with the

⁴⁸ Bernard (no last name given), “VA Blues,” *Free Fire Zone* 1, no.1 (c. 1973-1974), 2, Box 18, Folder 14; “Honor Vietnam Veterans, End the Damn VA Cutbacks, Organize to Fight,” VVAW flyer, n.d., Box 18, Folder 8; “Fight Late Checks,” VVAW flyer, n.d., Box 18, Folder 8, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁴⁹ “Veterans,” VVAW policy paper on recruitment, n.d. (likely 1972), Box 7, Folder 37, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁵⁰ St. Louis chapter newsletter, n.d. (1971), Box 4, Folder 15; “Long Beach Vietnam Veterans Against the War,” newsletter, June 1972, 1, Box 3, Folder 6, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

WWI Vet in the next bed.” Open for four hours a night, between 6:30 and 10:30 PM, it became a place for patients to “meet with their brothers” and “get away from the life of the Wards.”⁵¹

In Boston, VVAW took an especially active role in coordinating volunteer outreach at neighboring VA hospitals. For Veterans Day, 1971, the Cambridge chapter entertained over two hundred patients and guests with an energetic party filled with “[live] music, balloons, and, of course, the cook-out fare of hamburgers and hotdogs, plus sandwiches, cakes and cold drinks.” The hospital director called it a “memorable afternoon for the veterans” and thanked “the many V.V.A.W. members whose efforts made this event so successful.”⁵² At the Jamaica Plain and Boston VA facilities VVAWers volunteered in their admission areas, operating the “Information and Orientation Desks.” As per the position’s requirements, members assisted “prospective patients with hospital procedures,” guided “them thru admitting routines,” and performed “follow-up visit[s]” to the wards. They carried out these duties with great dedication, helping doctors “strengthen [their] treatment programs” and “bridging the information gap” between the VA and those Vietnam veterans who “do not avail themselves of their rightful health care benefits.”⁵³ These contributions did not go unnoticed by VA staffers who commended VVAW on its “successful efforts to make the Viet Nam Era veterans...at ease and cooperative toward the Hospital community.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ New York City VA Hospital Newsletter, August 17, 1970, 5-6, Box 8, Folder 9; Untitled essay on the VA hospital, n.d. (c. 1971), 1-2, Box 18, Folder 9; Roger De Vito to John Kerry, January 5, 1971, Box 5, Folder 7; Poster for “Dance and Party” at Woods VA Hospital, n.d. (c. 1973-1974), Box 23, Folder 39; DVAW Newsletter #3, October 1971, 2, Box 5, Folder 6, VVAW Papers, WSHS; Anna A. Acker, “Coming Home to Orange County: A History of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, 1971-1975” (M.A. thesis, California State University, Fullerton, 2005), 84.

⁵² Francis D. Careoll, M.D., Hospital Director, to VVAW New England Chapter, November 4, 1971, Box 2, Folder 28, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁵³ “Volunteer Assignment #3A: Information and Orientation Center,” n.d. (1971), Box 2, Folder 28; Letter from Dorothy E. Luckraft, Recreation Therapist, October 15, 1971, Box 2, Folder 28; Letter from David M. Holmes, M.D., October 13, 1971, Box 2, Folder 28, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁵⁴ Letter from Roger P. Quilty, C.S.C., Chaplain, October 18, 1971, Box 2, Folder 28, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

Volunteering in VA facilities, however, did not denote approval of the agency itself. Members could be concerned helpers one moment and caustic agitators the next. The Tuscaloosa, Alabama, chapter, after receiving an award from the local VA hospital in recognition of its charitable efforts, planned to publicly “come down on [VA doctors] for their inadequate drug treatment program.” In Milwaukee, veterans in the mid-1970s declared war on the VA, taking over its facilities multiple times a year to draw attention to the commonly substandard health care doled out to Vietnam vets. Similarly, on the West Coast, VVAWers invaded VA hospitals to mobilize patients and fight for better treatment.⁵⁵ Scores of hospitalized vets joined VVAW in the 1970s taking their first steps as activists by circulating petitions against the war and for improved hospital conditions. Cruz Sonabria, a patient at the Manhattan VA, first encountered VVAW in May 1970 after hospital authorities attempted to suppress a petition campaign he launched in opposition to the VA. Alerted to the demonstration, Hubbard contacted Sonabria and the other disabled vets involved to express the organization’s solidarity and to arrange for more publicity. Since VVAW remained one of the few support systems available to Vietnam veterans in situations like this, VA facilities became natural recruiting grounds. “I’ve been with the organization ever since then,” Sonabria informed a reporter a year later.⁵⁶

With immediate improvements to the VA not forthcoming, VVAW introduced its own programs to supplement and transcend those services provided by the state. Jan Barry initiated the process in November 1970 by contacting the prominent antiwar psychiatrist and acclaimed author Robert Jay Lifton, of Yale University, about a potential partnership with VVAW to address the harsh psychological trauma afflicting many Vietnam veterans. Lifton agreed and

⁵⁵ Tom Ashby to the Alabama-Mississippi chapters, May 3, 1972, Box 2, Folder 20; Mike Oliver and Lee Thorn, San Francisco Chapter Proposal, n.d. (1971), Box 3, Folder 12, VVAW Papers, WSHS; Bailey and Lindquist, interviews, *Winter Soldiers*, 274-275.

⁵⁶ Goldberg, “Vietnam Vets,” 16.

called on Dr. Chaim Shatan, a psychoanalyst at New York University, to help. For two hours a week they met in VVAW's cramped Manhattan headquarters with groups of Vietnam veterans to discuss the latter's concerns "about the war, American society, and their own lives."⁵⁷ Lifton recalled: "The explosion of feeling that occurred, associated as it was with a war whose pain pervaded all of our lives, rendered those first meetings unforgettable in their emotional power and poignancy."⁵⁸ Starting with twelve members, the number of participants soon swelled such that after one month a second "rap group" formed. Each was governed by an "open door policy" that allowed vets to come and go as they pleased. Inter-group relationships were equally informal as veterans and professional therapists (more had been recruited) addressed one another on a first-name basis, a policy VVAW had insisted on from the beginning.⁵⁹ "The veterans use us as resource people," Shatan explained. "Any tendencies to endow us with an authoritative mantle have been short-lived in spite of, or perhaps because of, their previous military experience — apparently they have had their fill of authority figures and chains of command."⁶⁰

The force of experimentation pulsed through the rap groups as veterans "talked, argued, made up, hugged, got confused, told stories, asked for advice, gave advice, complained, cried, and occasionally laughed" about their experiences.⁶¹ In this frenzied atmosphere, meetings unfolded on an *ad hoc* basis. Years later, VVAW activist Arthur Egendorf remembered this spontaneity warmly. "We followed no special formula and no set procedure," he said. "The only truth about the groups...is that we improvised as we went along. The mix of ingredients included a measure of psychotherapy brought by volunteer therapists, a dose of what we thought encounter groups and consciousness-raising groups should be, some political education, and lots

⁵⁷ Lifton, *Home from the War*, 75-76.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 76-78; Barry, interview with author, October 30, 2013.

⁶⁰ Chaim F. Shatan, "How Do We Turn Off the Guilt?" *Human Behavior* 2, no. 2 (Feb. 1973): 59.

⁶¹ Egendorf, *Healing from the War*, 115.

of caring.”⁶² Lifton, for his part, shared with the veterans a desire to create a new method of healing free of “hierarchical distancing, medical mystification, [and] psychological reductionism.”⁶³ At the time Barry first approached Lifton, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) had yet to be recognized as a legitimate medical condition and instead of treating for psychological damage, VA officials fell back on over-medicating emotionally strained Vietnam veterans. The rap group technique had a liberating quality to it, proffering not only relief from the unacknowledged psychiatric difficulties of PTSD, then called Post-Vietnam Syndrome (PVS), but also as a method of self-healing free of rigid authority and stifling bureaucracy. “Because of the lack of trust on the part of veterans of professional people,” wrote the Orange County chapter, “small groups led by veterans themselves is the best way to begin the self awakening to PVS.”⁶⁴

The original New York rap group lasted four years. After showing signs of success, additional rap groups were established in Detroit, Milwaukee, Denver, Portland, and San Francisco. Some lasted only a few short months; others turned into established fixtures of their communities. San Francisco’s rap group benefited from the guidance of VVAW coordinator Jack McCloskey. A well-decorated former Marine corpsman, McCloskey served four years in the Armed Forces before being recalled in 1967 and sent to Vietnam to serve as a medic for the Second Battalion of the Seventh Marines. Recipient of a Purple Heart, Bronze Star, and Silver Star, McCloskey endured intense combat in Hue during the surprise Tet offensive, where he was wounded.⁶⁵ Like other veterans he struggled with addiction after his discharge and turned to

⁶² *Ibid.*, 115.

⁶³ Lifton, *Home from the War*, 77, 83.

⁶⁴ VVAW/WSO, Orange County chapter, “An Essay on the Problems of the Returning Vietnam Veteran,” n.d. (c. 1973), 7, Box 3, Folder 14, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁶⁵ Larry D. Hatfield, “Veteran’s Activist Dies at 53,” *San Francisco Chronicle-Examiner*, February 18, 1996, reprinted in *The Veteran* 26, no. 1 (Fall 1996), 10; Nicosia, *Home to War*, 541.

antiwar activism to provide direction. “Until I got involved, all I would do was go to school and get drunk, go to school and get drunk,” he said.⁶⁶ A vital member of the Bay Area community, he took the San Francisco rap group and built it into a first-rate clinic to address issues of PTSD, unemployment, addiction, and suicide.⁶⁷

Such experiences, not surprisingly, made VVAW an early advocate for research into Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. At the 1972 national steering committee meeting in Palo Alto, California, members voted to establish “a national clearinghouse in the Milwaukee chapter to collect and disseminate information on PVS.” For the next year, John Lindquist, the project curator, diligently collected academic articles and case histories on PVS to aid families, professionals, and civil servants in gaining “a helpful beginning towards understanding” the difficulties of readjusting to life after Vietnam.⁶⁸ Additional projects designed to reach out and educate the public motivated several chapters in the period after Dewey Canyon III. On the West Coast, VVAWers in staunchly conservative Orange County, California, proved particularly creative. Drawing on what resources they could, the veterans researched and distributed an informational pamphlet, “Home from the War,” and in 1975 collaborated with University of California, Los Angeles film school students to produce the documentary, *Still at War*. The film showcased interviews with recently returned veterans coping with PVS and the nightmarish conditions of the local VA hospital. A statement of protest and poignant reflection, the

⁶⁶ Jack McCloskey, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 99.

⁶⁷ Hatfield, “Veteran’s Activist Dies,” 10.

⁶⁸ “PVS Workshop Proposal,” contained in the minutes for the Palo Alto National Steering Committee Meeting, September 29-October 2, 1972, 11, Box 1, Folder 10; John Lindquist, “PVS Clearinghouse Report,” contained in the minutes for the Yellow Springs National Steering Committee Meeting, December 27-31, 1973, 3, Box 1, Folder 13; John A. Lindquist, “Post Vietnam Syndrome National Clearing House,” n.d. (August 1973), Box 5, Folder 24, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

filmmakers framed part of their narrative around the search for a missing patient who after five days was found dead behind the women's ward hanging from his own "fatigue pants."⁶⁹

Struggles with addiction weighed equally as heavy on Vietnam veterans. Tales of drug use in Vietnam, widely circulated over the years, dominate popular recollections of the war. In reality, alcohol was the primary intoxicant of choice for GIs. Marijuana certainly attracted a strong following among soldiers, increasing in use as the war persisted; but like heroin, which was never as popular as commonly supposed, it had been confined primarily to non-combat zones.⁷⁰ Still, drugs *did* constitute a part of Vietnam's military culture, even if not on a grand scale. According to a survey commissioned by the Department of Defense to analyze drug use in the Army, 51 percent of GIs smoked marijuana at least once in 1970 while 14 percent reported using it daily.⁷¹ The Pentagon anxiously initiated its first amnesty program in October 1969 to rid the military of this "major worry." Its results were less than ideal. In fact, efforts by the brass to "crack down" on marijuana use might have inadvertently contributed to the rise in addiction among servicemen as those soldiers looking for ways to escape their present realities, and avoid detection, turned to less conspicuous and odorless narcotics — heroine and cocaine — as a substitute for pot. South Vietnam's black market made such acquisitions easy. Claimed one GI: "Getting smack was like getting a bottle of beer. Everybody sells it."⁷² Sadly, the perils of addiction did not end there. Drug abuse continued to threaten soldiers in their post-service lives as well. A 1971 Lou Harris Poll found that 325,000 Vietnam vets reported taking heroin at some point after their discharge.⁷³

⁶⁹ Acker, "Coming Home to Orange County," 83.

⁷⁰ Kuzmarov, *Myth of the Addicted Army*, 15-36.

⁷¹ Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt*, 29-30.

⁷² Fred Ferretti, "The Vietnam Veteran: 175,000 Addicts," *Penthouse*, May 1974, 58.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 58-59, 61-62.

As with PVS, the VA adapted slowly to the needs of drug-addicted veterans. Prior to 1968 the Veterans Administration had little experience with drug rehabilitation, and although it accepted drug-dependent veterans as emergency patients, its policy continued to view addiction as a non-service connected disability and thus not covered by VA provisions. Part of the problem had been the military's initial handling of addicts. Instead of properly treating soldiers, military officials thought it more expedient to dole out less-than-honorable discharges rendering them ineligible for VA care. In 1968 there were 586 such discharges related to drug abuse. By 1972, the number had climbed to 849.⁷⁴ As exaggerated stories of a drug addicted military converged on the home front, bipartisan support for anti-drug legislation swelled. On June 17, 1971, President Nixon, looking to assuage the nation's anxieties over the war, condemned drug abuse as "America's public enemy number one" and ordered "that a four-point program be started immediately by the Secretary of Defense to combat drug addiction in the military." The proposal included the "institution of a detoxification program for servicemen before they return to the United States" and the "expansion of treatment programs in the U.S."⁷⁵ In working toward these ends, Nixon increased the treatment budget from \$28 to \$300 million. He also established "some 2,000 rehabilitation programs and 73,000 methadone treatment slots nationwide, including twenty-eight VA clinics that had previously refused to assist veterans thought to be using drugs."⁷⁶

Veterans, however, remained resistant. Many continued to distrust the VA hospital system while countless others failed to qualify for service owing to the nature of their discharges. Reflecting on such realities, Senator Alan Cranston of California, the future Chairman of the

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 61-63.

⁷⁵ Department of Defense, "Drug Addiction in the Military," *Department of Defense Information Guidance Series*, no. 8B-2, June 1971, 1, found in Box 12, Folder 6, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁷⁶ Kuzmarov, *Myth of the Addicted Army*, 110.

Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, later lamented "that tens of thousands of veteran addicts on the streets today simply have no faith in the VA drug treatment programs."⁷⁷ Indeed, even those VA facilities that initiated experimental projects to aid with addiction were chided for their seemingly draconian structure. After reading about a new drug rehabilitation program at the Bedford, Massachusetts's VA, one veteran called it a "prison," citing its strict selection process and punitive emphasis on conformity and structure.⁷⁸ The program's statement of recruitment made no effort to conceal its severity to potential patients, saying:

Changing your life is not something that is done to you; it is something you do for yourself. You will be very uncomfortable here. You will often find our way of life hard, irritating, stupid and unsatisfactory. You will be disgusted often and want to quit. You will not understand what is going on. You will be told to do things you don't want to do. You will be expected to struggle to tell the truth and hear the truth, and you will discover that the truth is not always easy to find, and is often not pleasant when you find it.⁷⁹

Unwilling to yield to the judgment of the VA, VVAWers responded accordingly. In Boston and Rhode Island they established referral systems where drug-dependent vets were put in contact with sympathetic psychotherapists.⁸⁰ In Chicago, members proposed a rehabilitation project for heroin addicts designed to empower a patient's agency. "I would like to see [our] rehab be an alternative to current rehab projects," explained its architect. "Instead of preparing the person to accept traditional roles of rehab, and their role in society, we must destroy the Oh, were you a

⁷⁷ Ferretti, "Vietnam Veteran," 63. For the sake of nuance, it should be stressed here that there is a difference between use and abuse. Experimentation with heroin did not automatically connote addiction. While there was an increase in heroin use among Americans in the 1970s, especially in big cities, this was less the result of an upsurge in the rate of addicted veterans than a myriad of other socioeconomic factors related "shifting cultural values, population growth among baby boomers..., and a decline of the nation's inner cities due to sociopolitical ferment and neglect." In fact, less than 10 percent of veterans who tested positive for heroin in Vietnam used the drug once they returned to the United States. Moreover, as one study found, heroin use was "more common among non-veterans than Vietnam era veterans." See, Kuzmarov, *Myth of the Addicted Army*, 34-35, 54.

⁷⁸ Bedford, Massachusetts, VA drug rehabilitation program, advertisement reprinted as part of a VVAW national memorandum, n.d. (c. early 1972), 1-2, Box 8, Folder 28; Anonymous letter criticizing the Bedford VA program, n.d. (c. early 1972), Box 8, Folder 28, VVAW Papers, WSHS. According to the letter writer, veterans, apparently, had to be drug free for three days and attend three rap sessions before their admittance was approved.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Rhode Island Chapter, "Newsletter #1," n.d. (May 1971), 1, Box 5, Folder 12, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

heroin addict I can't use you syndrome." Emphasis was placed on providing prospective patients with meaningful work, and later, making them program organizers.⁸¹

The success rate of these projects varied. Operating on shoestring budgets with an inconsistent membership, some programs snowballed while others foundered. All, however, were characterized by an improvisational tone that eschewed formal structure and excessive overhead. John Kniffin and his wife, Cathy, for instance, ran a successful drug rehabilitation clinic out of their home in Austin. Following their own makeshift curriculum, they took in homeless vets suffering from heroin and morphine addictions and used marijuana to help them cope with withdrawal. Employing one drug to offset another just seemed natural to the Kniffins. "It worked for John, so he figured it would work for them," explained Nancy Miller Saunders.⁸² The alternative was using methadone, a highly addictive painkiller developed during the Second World War for injured soldiers. Though legal, reports from the early 1960s suggested grave side effects associated with the drug, such as trouble breathing, heart problems, and insomnia. A decade later, activists associated with White Lightening, a Bronx-based anti-addiction group, called for the "elimination of legal addictive drugs such as methadone" on the premise that "[m]ethadone is more addictive and physically more destructive than heroin."⁸³ VVAWers largely echoed this opinion, stating, as one veteran did, that methadone "is not a cure, it's a crutch, it's a copout for a junkie who one day can't cop a bag, so he knows he can go to the clinic and stay high...until he hits the street."⁸⁴

To combat these conditions, VVAW countered by creating its own alternative centers for healing free of government control. Larry Rottmann, coordinator for the New Mexico chapter,

⁸¹ "Drug Abuse Program," n.d. (1972), Box 1, Folder 10, VVAW papers, WSHS.

⁸² Saunders, *Combat by Trial*, 166-167.

⁸³ White Lightening, "Drug Plague—A Revolutionary Solution," poster, n.d., Box 8, Folder 28, VVAW Papers, WSHS; Sonnie and Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists*, 163.

⁸⁴ Anonymous letter criticizing the Bedford VA program.

developed the idea for an R&R ranch named Boones Farm high up in the San Juan Mountains near the Colorado border. Isolated from the hustle and bustle of city living, the proposed ranch was to double as a “drug/psychiatric treatment center” and a “retreat for guys from the Albuquerque and Denver VA hospitals.”⁸⁵ Boones Farm never got off the ground, but other chapters experienced greater success. In Chesapeake, Virginia, a group of VVAWers leased one hundred acres of land from a sympathetic World War II vet to form the Vietnam Casualty Farm, a place where down-and-out vets could live, learn to farm, join rap groups, get job training, and find drug treatment. Most residents were “ex-city dwellers” looking to “leave the war in the city” and live a life of minimalism. Amenities were thus modest, with some vets sleeping in an old broken-down car.⁸⁶ Such conditions were characteristic of most VVAW projects, not just its Vietnam Casualty Farm. On Block Island, Rhode Island, Connecticut organizers launched their own R&R base. Unpretentious in appearance, lodging consisted of “a nice house, kind of isolated, with hot and cold running water, and lots of floor space waiting to be filled.” In west Oregon, members launched a remote rehab farm for heroin-addicted vets looking to escape the VA’s institutional atmosphere.⁸⁷

Just as inventive were the various multi-issue programs VVAW established in cities. Along with the R&R ranches, chapters built halfway houses for veterans in Minneapolis, Milwaukee, and Colorado, and a job counseling center in St. Paul, Minnesota.⁸⁸ The halfway houses functioned as an urban equivalent to the R&R retreats, supplying veterans with psychiatric help, drug rehabilitation, and career mentorship. In California, the Santa Cruz chapter

⁸⁵ Larry Rottmann to Mike Oliver, October 3, 1971, Box 4, Folder 20; Larry Rottmann, “New Mexico/Arizona Newsletter,” n.d. (mid-1971), 2, Box 2, Folder 29, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁸⁶ Marsh Harre, “Down on the Farm,” *1st Casualty* 1, August 1971, 9; Nicosia, “Veteran in Conflict,” 4.

⁸⁷ Susan Schumann to VVAW Connecticut, June 16, 1972, Box 3, Folder 18, VVAW Papers, WSHS; Oliver and Thorn, San Francisco Chapter Proposal.

⁸⁸ VVAW, “History,” n.d. (c. early 1972), Box 1, Folder 3, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

joined forces with two college-based veterans clubs to form the Veterans' Cooperative of Santa Cruz County in June 1972. Together, the co-op fought to use "office space within the Veterans Memorial building" as a base from which to "formalize and broaden" its outreach to local veterans. A written proposal, detailing the cooperative's objectives, reveals the scope of its ambitions: psychological and drug counseling with licensed professionals; employment and housing referrals; discharge upgrading programs; a 24-hour emergency hot line; free busing to the nearest VA hospital; tutorials for veterans applying to, and attending, college; and assistance to individuals "in obtaining disability and education benefits from the Veterans Administration."⁸⁹ The success rate of each VVAW project depended on the level of community support. Most were staffed on a "volunteer basis, with doctors, psychiatrists, clergy, and others donating their time and services."⁹⁰ Before opening its halfway house, the Minneapolis chapter solicited local community groups for assistance, receiving upwards of \$3,000 in donations. Similarly, the St. Paul office launched its job counseling center after a sympathetic real estate broker bequeathed to the chapter a twelve-room house to aid in this endeavor.⁹¹

Most chapters made do with what they had. In Philadelphia, a group of Vietnam veterans managed a day-program where participants attended rap sessions, workshops, and acquired assistance finding employment and a place to live. Legal counsel and support with handling the VA were "also made available." Called "Half Step," the VVAW-affiliated project opened its doors in November 1971 out of "a one room office" overseen by "three full time volunteer staff

⁸⁹ The Veterans' Cooperative of Santa Cruz County, Program Proposal, n.d., Box 3, Folder 14, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁹⁰ "Vietnam Veterans Against the War Isn't Just a Protest Group!" contained in Rottmann, "New Mexico/Arizona Newsletter."

⁹¹ Rottmann, "New Mexico/Arizona Newsletter," 3; "Regional Coordinators—Weekly Report #2," n.d. (March 1971), Box 1, Folder 6, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

members who kept it alive.”⁹² By spring 1973 the program had serviced over three hundred Vietnam veterans and used the city’s Public Education Program to raise awareness about the readjustment problems vets faced. “We hope to interest people in doing their part in solving the problem,” they said.⁹³ Success stories such as Half Step had a motivating influence on other chapters. In Jamaica, Queens, where no VA hospital existed, members “adopted” the Manhattan center as their own and facilitated an “educational and recreation program” with “[c]lasses on history and politics and arts and crafts.” They also planned to offer “‘rap groups,’ drug rehabilitation referrals, and, in the future, job placements and aid securing VA benefits” through their home office.⁹⁴ The Brooklyn chapter explored similar options, “setting up a psychotherapy program for returning veterans and a tutoring program for High School Equivalency Exams and College courses.”⁹⁵

To better assist their communities, some chapters sent out questionnaires to local vets to get a sense of the problems confronting them and how VVAW might best respond. Surveys were distributed in California’s Bay Area and New York City to gauge the quality of chapter activity, determine what projects were in demand, and ascertain the participant’s level of commitment to the organization. The Tuscaloosa chapter, in 1973, “initiated the Alabama Veterans Service Project, a project designed to research the needs of Alabama’s veterans and then lobby for and introduce legislation to help alleviate those needs.”⁹⁶ The program evoked an earlier example set by those in the Minneapolis chapter where VVAWers played the role of an unofficial ombudsman, canvassing neighborhood vets in search of stories relaying any difficulties they had

⁹² Don Sproehnle, et al., “Half Step, Inc: A Veteran Self-Help Concept,” April 26, 1973, 1-2, 4, Box 18, Folder 14, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹⁴ “Queens Vietnam Veterans Against the War,” n.d. (1971), Box 4, Folder 27, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁹⁵ Brooklyn chapter newsletter, n.d., Box 4, Folder 27, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁹⁶ Alabama-Mississippi-Tennessee Region, “Regional News,” n.d. (c. June 1973), 1, Box 2, Folder 20; Alabama Veterans Service Project Proposal, enclosed in, Tom Ashby to Bart [Savage], May 20, 1973, Box 2, Folder 20, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

finding employment, getting accepted into college, or securing VA benefits. These complaints were compiled into a dossier and used to “substantiate” the chapter’s push “for a change in legislation and administrative procedure in the Veterans Administration.” In the same spirit, storefront offices were set up in cities like Brooklyn and Oakland to make VVAW “more a part of its community.”⁹⁷

For all the work that went into making these programs possible, the vast majority operated off the beaten path and outside the media’s spotlight. The only project to escape such anonymity was perhaps Twice Born Men. Spearheaded in 1971 by San Francisco’s Jack McCloskey, the project’s impetus stemmed from a suicide within the chapter. “We were starting to recognize that we had a lot of problems,” remembered Lee Thorn, who helped McCloskey put Twice Born Men together. “Some guys had deep, deep problems, and nobody was talking to these guys, you know, because we didn’t trust anybody.”⁹⁸ A former Navy reservist, Thorn spent ten months on an air craft carrier in the Gulf of Tonkin from December 1965 until his discharge in September 1966. When he returned, he resettled in the Bay Area, close to the Berkeley campus where he had attended school before being drafted, firmly opposed to the escalating conflict. “It wasn’t an ideological position, it was a practical position,” he said of his antiwar convictions. “I mainly was against the war because I thought it was useless and I wanted to help other active duty people get back as soon as possible.”⁹⁹ Looking to connect with likeminded veterans, he co-founded an antiwar vets group at the university in 1967 through which he later met McCloskey, and in 1971 joined VVAW.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Bay Area Vietnam Veterans Against the War, “Questionnaire,” n.d., Box 3, Folder 12; New York City Chapter Survey, January 11, 1973, Box 4, Folder 24; *Minnesota Homefront Sniper*, August 1971, 8; “We Are Everywhere,” *1st Casualty*, July 1972, 10.

⁹⁸ Thorn, interview with author, December 3, 2013.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

To prevent further suicides from happening, the San Francisco vets made contact with some professional therapists and began holding rap group sessions out of their chapter headquarters. Quickly it became clear that this was not enough and that more attention needed to be paid to those veterans not attending their gatherings.¹⁰¹ To better meet the needs of the Bay Area's veteran community, McCloskey founded Twice Born Men, an ambitious self-help project consisting of a drop-in counseling center in the city and a rustic R&R farm situated on a sixty acre plot of land with a prefabricated house donated by the folksinger Joan Baez.¹⁰² Dubbed Raisin City, the farm, outside of Fresno, California, gave McCloskey a chance to hone his skills as a counselor, bringing Vietnam veterans, ex-prisoners, and troubled youths together in unity to grow vegetables and practice self-sufficiency. "The farm was a catharsis," McCloskey recalled. "The catharsis was these people had all this trauma in their lives, and they would plant things and see this shit grow.... Instead of destruction, seeing construction."¹⁰³ But Twice Born Men did not start out as an R&R farm. "That was kind of an accident," said Thorn. The program's nucleus was actually located in McCloskey's San Francisco apartment, where he and his wife Lydia, a Quaker, ran their own *de facto* counseling service employing techniques developed from the rap groups. As part of the project, McCloskey and Thorn also made house calls to suicidal vets. Recalled Thorn:

We'd get a call, usually a relative of somebody, or sometimes somebody them self, saying this guy was threatening suicide, or he was going to shoot somebody, or some fucking thing. And so Jack and I would share a couple joints and some whiskey and we'd knock on the door and say, "Hey, it's Jack and Lee, wanna smoke?"¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² McCloskey, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 271.

¹⁰³ McCloskey, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 271-272.

¹⁰⁴ Thorn, interview with author, December 3, 2013.

Once the tension lessened, Thorn continued, “Jack would talk to him about maybe going over to the VA, or something, [to] get some help. If he wouldn’t do that, we’d help him in other ways. We’d get him in contact with someone...and try to get him to hang out with us.”¹⁰⁵ Though wildly unorthodox, Twice Born Men became so effective that the Palo Alto VA hospital eventually started referring some of its Vietnam-era patients to the San Francisco chapter for group therapy.¹⁰⁶

Twice Born Men lasted roughly three years and by May 1973 was \$2,300 in debt. Governed with little to no oversight, its methods held to a bottom-up belief in the elimination of the patient-healer hierarchy and a preference for connecting “on the vets’ own turf.”¹⁰⁷ In this it functioned like the majority of VVAW projects, fostering a grassroots, libertarian environment of person-to-person contact. The model signaled a radical alternative to the status quo. Instead of looking for answers within the current postwar liberal order, VVAW reached beyond it and in its stead posited a thoroughly decentralized vision of small-scale local organizing run by and for Vietnam veterans. Not unlike the legions of counterculture ventures which set out to reconfigure the boundaries of social organizing along more cooperative and communal lines, VVAWers tapped into a cultural vision with their community programs that asked participants to renegotiate their social relations with the hope of cultivating more creative and personable expressions of interaction.

The example set by VVAW, especially in Northern California, had a contagious effect. A year after Twice Born Men opened, Jack McCloskey and Lee Thorn joined with a group of

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Orange County chapter, “An Essay on the Problems of the Returning Vietnam Veteran,” 7.

¹⁰⁷ California State Regional Conference, minutes, May 26-27, 1973, 2, Box 2, Folder 21, VVAW Papers, WSHS; McCloskey, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 271-272; Scott, *Politics of Readjustment*, 45.

young veterans in nearby Santa Rosa to form Flower of the Dragon, one of the nation's first official multi-service veteran centers designed to target peer counseling, job development, housing, and benefits assistance.¹⁰⁸ "The idea was to bring veterans together and start an organization for veterans to come feel recognized, feel safe, secure," said Peter Cameron, one of its founders. They later held job fairs, art shows, and organized a baseball team as creative strategies for helping veterans with the reintegration process.¹⁰⁹ Several of those working at Flower of the Dragon were familiar with VVAW, if not members themselves, but the group itself functioned as a non-VVAW project. Swords to Plowshares, another pioneering multi-service veterans group, shared a similar trajectory. With a grant from the Department of Labor, six Vietnam veterans, four of them VVAWers, including McCloskey, formed the San Francisco-based group in 1974 to work with incarcerated and unemployed Vietnam veterans.¹¹⁰ Operating outside the structure of VVAW, Swords' official history made no reference to its predecessor, but its influences were plain. "The rap groups came out of VVAW; Twice Born Men came out of the rap groups; Swords to Plowshares came out of Twice Born Men and the ex-members of VVAW that were working for the VA," McCloskey explained.¹¹¹

VVAW, of course, did not exist in a vacuum. Quietly, dozens of other independent vet projects materialized in municipalities across the country. Reintegration into the community proved a dominant theme. A small group of Vietnam-era student vets attending the University of Alabama formed the Veterans Services Association (VSA) "to enable vets to help each other and themselves." Together, with supportive faculty and campus personnel, they offered rap groups, a

¹⁰⁸ Thorn, interview with author, December 3, 2013.

¹⁰⁹ Leah Phillips, "Emotions Run High at Vietnam War Lecture," *Oak Leaf Newspaper*, April 23, 2012, 13.

¹¹⁰ McCloskey, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 272; "Swords to Plowshares at a Glance," *Swords to Plowshares*, <www.swords-to-plowshares-.org/wp-content/uploads/Swords-to-Plowshares-History1.pdf> (accessed 17 March 2014).

¹¹¹ McCloskey, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 272.

tutorial program, information on financial aid, and employment assistance.¹¹² At the Milwaukee-based Veterans Community House, organized with the support of the local VVAW chapter, vets were provided “a live-in rehabilitation facility” to assist in their transition back to civilian life. While ultimately short-lived, in one year the House served seventy veterans, roughly twelve at a time for two months, offering individual counseling, positive peer modeling, and resources for employment and education training.¹¹³ Some projects dwindled, while others experienced remarkable longevity. Eighty miles away, in Madison, Wisconsin, Vets House, founded in 1973, grew into one of the oldest and most effective community-based organizations serving Vietnam-era veterans. For over fifteen years it supplied such needed services as “job placement, vocational counseling, benefits counseling, discharge review, services for incarcerated veterans, emergency assistance, a crisis hot line, support groups, [and] statewide PTSD education and referral assistance.”¹¹⁴ On the West Coast, the Seattle Veterans Action Center (SEA-VAC) performed a similar function. Formed in 1971, for ten years it coordinated a comprehensive set of readjustment initiatives in the field of job development, peer counseling, legal assistance, drug rehabilitation, and access to educational and financial aid. A determined advocate for veterans’ rights, SEA-VAC became a model for all future multi-service veteran organizations of its kind.¹¹⁵

Financial support for these programs came from a variety of sources. Initial funding to establish SEA-VAC was secured through federal appropriations with additional assistance from Washington State and the municipally-based Seattle-King County Economic Opportunity Board.

¹¹² “Vets Helping Vets,” program outline, enclosed in, Frank B. Angarola to VVAW/WSO National Office, November 23, 1973, Box 18, Folder 14, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹¹³ Ralph J. Yehle and Daryl J. Eigen, “The Milwaukee Veterans’ Community House: A Behavior Care Model,” April 6, 1973, 5-6, Box 18, Folder 14, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹¹⁴ “History, Mission & Current Activities,” n.d. (1988), 1, Box 21, File 8, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹¹⁵ Dwight Long and Mary E. Garvey, “Seattle Veterans Action Group (SEA-VAC) Six Month Historical Report,” February 23, 1972, 9-17, 20, Box 18, Folder 5, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

Vets House, in like fashion, received monetary sustenance from mainstream benefactors at the federal, state, and local levels, among them: the Veterans Administration, the Department of Labor, the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs, the National Council of Churches, and United Way.¹¹⁶ Based on its records, VVAW seems to have generally eschewed such funding opportunities, relying instead on private donations, speaking fees, and merchandise sales to maintain its coffers.¹¹⁷ As evidenced by programs like Twice Born Men, this was not sustainable, at least not in the long term. When “money gets tighter, and...if they [projects] don’t have prime movers, they don’t continue,” conceded Barry Romo.¹¹⁸ The New York City chapter acknowledged as much in its 1972 proposal to establish a New York City Veterans Action Center, lamenting: “Our experiences to date with a skeleton volunteer staff strongly supports having a paid staff....Volunteers are understandably unable to spend the necessary time working at NYC VAC, and the work accomplished is minimal.”¹¹⁹

In its quest for reform, however, VVAW followed no set template. True to Jan Barry’s original vision, members were free to pursue the strategies that most interested them. Thus, while individual chapters labored to meet the needs of veterans in their local communities, VVAW at the national level worked to enshrine some of these practices into law. Tasked with reforming “the rigid bureaucracy of the Veterans Administration,” the organization installed its own congressional liaison (former Green Beret Captain Rusty Lindley) at 47 Ivy Street, close to Capitol Hill, and created the Veterans Action Group in affiliation with Democratic

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7-8; “History, Mission & Current Activities,” 1.

¹¹⁷ Bob Hanson, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 209; Al Hubbard, “Interim Report on Current Projects,” n.d. (1971), Box 7, Folder 37, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹¹⁸ Romo, interview with author, November 25, 2013

¹¹⁹ New York City Chapter, “A Proposal to Establish a New York City Veterans Action Center,” n.d. [c. 1972], 9, Box 18, Folder 5, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

congresswoman Bella Abzug.¹²⁰ VVAW anticipated big things from its partnership with Abzug, but made clear its unwillingness to toe the Democratic Party line. “This is not a group to back Bella.... [S]he and other members of Congress will be supporting [our] recommendations,” group spokesmen Arthur Egendorf assured. In utilizing Abzug’s lawyers and Washington contacts, VVAW looked to acquire a stronger voice in the legislative process, one that permitted them to “draw, document, and publicize proposals that could be presented on the floor of the Congress.”¹²¹ In accordance with this goal, the Veterans Action Group proceeded in the summer of 1971 to draft a series of well-researched documents outlining for Congress solutions to the troubles afflicting Vietnam vets.¹²² The problems were easy to identify: drug addiction, unemployment, military discharge procedures, readjustment, health care, and GI benefits. More challenging were its solutions, which typically went against the grain of how legislators traditionally allocated power. For instance, instead of forcing veterans into selecting a preordained program for drug addiction, VVAW encouraged Congress to provide multiple “treatment modalities” and give patients “free choice” in determining the type of therapy most conducive to them. “Individual addicts must be given a wide latitude of choice in the kind of program and location of their treatment,” they insisted.¹²³

Proposals for restructuring the Veterans Administration followed a similar pattern. “Reintegration for many veterans of the Vietnam era entails a strenuous repudiation of former

¹²⁰ Saunders, *Combat by Trial*, 213; Scott, *Politics of Readjustment*, 38; Arthur Egendorf to VVAW members, n.d. (June 1971), Box 18, Folder 7, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹²¹ Egendorf to VVAW members.

¹²² Proposals written by the Veterans Action Group in the summer of 1971 include: “Guidelines for the Rehabilitation of Military and Veteran Heroin Addicts,” “Proposals for a Realistic System of Benefits for Vietnam Era Veterans,” “Employment Problems of the Vietnam Veteran,” “Unemployment: Re-Ordering of Social Priorities,” “Project Transition,” “Proposals to Amend Military Discharge Procedures,” and “Proposals for Improving VA Facilities and Suggestions for Improving the Care which Its Patients Receive.” See Box 18, Folder 7, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹²³ The Veterans Action Group, “Guidelines for the Rehabilitation of Military and Veteran Heroin Addicts,” summer 1971, 5-6, Box 18, Folder 7, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

ties with the Federal government during the initial period,” the Veterans Action Group explained. For this reason, it made sense that the VA “*not* be given the primary responsibility for the administration of or the implementation of drug programs for veterans.”¹²⁴ To more effectively assist in the rehabilitation of veteran addicts, the group proposed a constellation of treatment centers “dispersed throughout the civilian community in order to reach those in need.” Centers would continue to be funded by the federal government, but managed by a series of “coordinating” agencies composed of social workers, educational advisors, VA representatives, veterans, and former addicts who were more in tune with the community’s needs.¹²⁵ In this new arrangement, coordinating agencies would “be authorized to fund the expansion of existing programs in local hospitals and drug centers, to make room for veteran addicts,” and finance “local veterans groups to start their own drug programs,” thus further curbing the state’s influence.¹²⁶ As a general solution to the problem of the VA’s “bureaucratic rigidity,” the Veterans Action Group advocated for a complete “structural re-alignment” of the federal agency. “The V.A. should be decentralized,” it argued. That is to say “store-fronts manned by young vets in local communities should replace or supplement the large V.A. centers.”¹²⁷

That VVAW continued to work within the system to bring about change is not surprising. Pluralism, after all, characterized the group’s identity in the early 1970s. Just as some vets had turned their backs on Washington after Dewey Canyon III, others remained hopeful that with the right connections and moral passion lasting reform could be achieved through Congress. Yet the change they sought extended well beyond lobbying for greater appropriations to fund existing

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7, 9. Emphasis added.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹²⁷ “Veterans Action Group,” n.d. (c. June 1971), 3, Box 18, Folder 7, VVAW Papers, WSHS. See also The Veterans Action Group, “Proposals for Improving VA Facilities and Suggestions for Improving the Care which Its Patients Receive,” summer 1971, Box 18, Folder 7, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

welfare programs. As the proposals composed by the Veterans Action Group demonstrate, VVAW employed mainstream strategies for radical ends. Not content to simply modify the existing VA system to satisfy growing demands, VVAW looked to overhaul the recalcitrant bureaucracy and render it more dynamic and amendable to patients' needs. Key to this was recognizing the level of antipathy Vietnam veterans felt toward the federal government and finding ways of making the VA leaner and less institutional, by integrating veterans' treatment more seamlessly into their communities.

In working toward this objective, the Veterans Action Group looked to achieve on a national scale what VVAW chapters were implementing at state and municipal levels. As such, their goals were mutually reinforcing. Without a firm commitment to reform from Congress, permanent, through-going change would never come to those vets suffering in the VA's tangled matrix of bureaucracy and neglect. In the meantime, chapters did what they could to ease this suffering and carve out spaces of healing free from the top-down, derelict environment proffered by the Veterans Administration. In its most basic form, this consisted of organizing rock concerts for patients, manning the Information and Orientation Desks, and starting referral services for drug addicts and PTSD. At its most sophisticated, it included rap groups, R&R centers, drug rehab programs, halfway houses, and multi-service storefronts. Taken together, these efforts represent something other than just a sweeping indictment of the VA health care system or a compassionate campaign for justice. More significantly, they spoke to VVAW's attitude toward the postwar liberal state and its preference for small-scale grassroots programming predicated on voluntary association, improvisation, and an anti-hierarchical patterns of organizing.

The extreme decentralization of VVAW's organizational structure after Dewey Canyon III facilitated this explosion in community activism. As state and city chapters divorced

themselves from the influence of the national office, they assumed greater control of VVAW and how it developed in their respective regions. This localist identity, so contrary to the postwar liberal order's emphasis on consolidation and central control, continued to inform the organization after 1971, allowing for new trends in VVAW to emerge. Ending the war in Vietnam remained a primary objective, as did its campaign against the Veterans Administration. Yet as VVAWers pondered the conflict's international and historical context, their analysis broadened to address themes of race, gender, and imperialism, further altering the group's complexion.

CHAPTER FOUR

Standing Strong

The period from 1972 to 1974 witnessed tremendous creativity for VVAW. Alongside the trend toward greater decentralization, renewed in the aftermath of Dewey Canyon III, and their ongoing struggles with the VA, the veterans continued to expand their community activism by building national and regional projects to redress the plight of racism at home and bolster antiwar protest within the Armed Forces. Like the group's campaign to supplement elements of the Veterans Administration, these projects emanated from the bottom up and together became part of a broader anti-imperialist agenda advocated by leaders in the national office. How members defined "imperialism" in this period varied from a rudimentary stance against racism to a more theoretical analysis of the Vietnam War as part of a larger history of empire and class struggle. In most local chapters, however, concrete action continued to take precedence over ideological clarity. Even as more and more members drifted further leftward, toward the teachings of Marx, Lenin, and Mao, VVAW maintained a "revolutionary pluralism" forged less on doctrinal dogma than an antistatist interest in grassroots activism.¹ Contrary to traditional interpretations, VVAW did not wither after the success of Dewey Canyon III. Although the group would confront a series of perilous obstacles in the years ahead, including an extensive government-sponsored campaign of surveillance and harassment designed to discredit and destroy the organization, VVAW continued to advocate forcefully for those who had been failed and forgotten by the state.

* * *

¹ The concept of "revolutionary pluralism" discussed here is adapted from Salvatore Salerno's use of the term in Salerno, *Red November, Black November: Culture and Community in the Industrial Workers of the World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 5-6.

Nineteen-seventy-two being an election year, VVAW decided to hold demonstrations at the Democratic and Republican National Conventions scheduled for the summer. The idea of sending members to each event originated at a February national steering committee meeting in Denver. Both political parties settled on Miami as the location for their gatherings after the White House relocated the Republican convention from San Diego to south Florida with the assumption that the latter would render delegates less “vulnerable” to “mass demonstrations.”² Of the two, the Republican convention received the bulk of VVAW’s attention. In contrast to the presidential primaries four years earlier, the vast majority of Democratic frontrunners vocally supported an antiwar platform, including its eventual nominee Senator George McGovern. The prospect of the Republicans electing their own antiwar candidate seemed much more remote. Especially after a May 14 Harris poll showed that nearly 60 percent of the country backed the escalation of President Richard Nixon’s air war in Vietnam.³ It seemed that as long as the withdrawal of U.S. ground troops continued and Nixon pursued his policy of “Vietnamization” — transferring the bulk of the war’s combat responsibilities to the South Vietnamese — a majority of Americans could get behind Nixon’s promise of peace with honor. The trend gratified the president, but troubled the veterans.

With the Republican National Convention scheduled for the third week of August, VVAW redoubled its efforts to deliver a dramatic protest. Plans for “Operation Last Patrol” were conceived by Chicago veterans Greg Betzel and Bart Savage who proposed that VVAWers from across the country descend on Miami Beach in a well-orchestrated convoy to confront their commander-in-chief. Equipped with two-way radios and strict travel guidelines — 500 miles per day at 50 miles per hour with five car lengths between each vehicle — the veterans’ “three-

² Minutes of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War National Steering Committee Meeting, Denver, Colorado, February 18-20, 1972, 3, Box 1, Folder 7, VVAW Papers, WSHS; Wells, *War Within*, 549.

³ Hunt, *Turning*, 146.

pronged” convoy broke for Miami on August 18 from Massachusetts, Oregon, and California, with “secondary link-up points” scheduled along the way.⁴ The veterans arrived Sunday, August 20, and set up camp in Flamingo Park where they were greeted by more than 3,500 demonstrators also on hand for the convention. Taken together, the three-day protest was something of a mixed success for VVAW. It started slowly with a “dull march” on Monday to Miami Beach High where a thousand Florida National Guardsmen were stationed, before hitting its stride the following day, August 22, with one of the era’s most stirring antiwar protests.⁵ Lining up in neat rows of four, an estimated 1,200 to 1,500 veterans marched from Flamingo Park up Collins Avenue to the Hotel Fontainebleau, site of the Republican National Convention, to demand an audience with the delegates. No words were spoken on the four-mile trek dubbed by its organizers the “Silent March.” Platoon leaders gave directions using hand signals off to the side. With most media representatives inside the hotel covering the convention, only a handful of journalists witnessed the drama unfold directly. Those who did knew they had seen something special. “There was an ominous sense of dignity about everything the VVAW did in Miami. They rarely even hinted at violence, but their very presence was menacing,” wrote Hunter S. Thompson for *Rolling Stone* magazine.⁶

The veterans’ inability to capitalize on the momentum provided by the Silent March had a deleterious effect on the remainder of Operation Last Patrol. Unsure of how to proceed, the camp fractured Wednesday evening during a lengthy steering committee meeting. An anonymous report, circulated in its aftermath, scolded national and regional leaders for the

⁴ Convoy routes for Operation Last Patrol, n.d. (August 1972), 1-2, Box 13, Folder 3, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁵ Lucian K. Truscott IV, “Vietnam Veterans Against the War,” *Saturday Review*, October 7, 1972, 16; Harmon, *Found, Featured, then Forgotten*, 91.

⁶ Truscott, “Vietnam Veterans Against the War,” 16; Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail ’72* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2006; originally published 1973), 363, 360-361.

resulting chaos. “Wednesday night there was a total breakdown in leadership,” its authors criticized. “The decision to let any member do what he/she wanted was in fact no decision at all.”⁷ Compounding the problem was the recent indictment of six VVAW members on July 13 by a Florida grand jury on charges of conspiring to disrupt the Republican National Convention through riotous activities. The original six — Scott Camil, John Kniffin, William Patterson, Peter Mahoney, Alton Foss, and Donald Perdue — were joined later by two additional defendants, Stan Michelsen and John Briggs, and branded the “Gainesville Eight” after the Florida city in which they were tried. Together, they stood accused of plotting to organize “fire teams” to attack police stations, cars, and storefronts using a cache of automatic weapons, smoke bombs, crossbows, and “wrist rocket sling shots” loaded with “fried marbles.” Key to the prosecution’s case against the veterans was testimony provided by FBI informant William W. Lemmer, a twenty-four-year-old ex-paratrooper and VVAW’s Arkansas-Oklahoma regional coordinator.⁸

FBI surveillance of VVAW was as old as the organization itself. The FBI started keeping tabs on VVAW in September 1967, three months after its founding. Field officers confined their espionage to determining “whether the organization is a target for Communist infiltration or its activities are in anyway directed, dominated, or controlled by the CP [Communist Party].”⁹ No evidence was furnished but plans to monitor and track VVAW continued unabated, accelerating after the success of Dewey Canyon III with the use of informants and *agents provocateurs* like Lemmer to perform the bureau’s bidding.¹⁰ It became an extensive, thoroughgoing operation carried out at all three levels of government. Elite police intelligence units in Los Angeles and

⁷ “Miami Analysis,” n.d. [1972], 3, Box 1, Folder 10, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁸ John Kifner, “Informer Appears Key to U.S Case Against 6 Antiwar Veterans,” *New York Times*, August 14, 1972.

⁹ SAC, New York (100-160644), memorandum to director, FBI, September 20, 1967, FBI File No. 100-HQ-448092: PSM Folder No. [12], Reel: 1, FOIA.

¹⁰ SAC, New York (100-160644), report on Vietnam Veterans Against the War to director, FBI, October 26, 1967, FBI File No. 100-HQ-448092: PSM Folder No. [12], Reel: 1, FOIA; Ramsdell, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 336.

New York (called “red squads”) raided members’ apartments and stole their personal files. In Miami, the FBI and Dade County police collaborated to plant drugs and extort a VVAW sympathizer into informing on the group under threat of arrest.¹¹ To further intimidate members, FBI agents approached veterans’ parents to provide information sparking “many arguments” between young activists and their families.¹² Over time, VVAWers became accustomed to such naked displays of state interference. In addition to having their homes ransacked and personal lives disrupted, members’ telephones were tapped, their offices bugged, and their whereabouts monitored constantly by local law enforcement agencies. “You would go out and walk down the street to eat, and they’re following you with a guy snapping pictures of you. They weren’t even subtle about it,” John Kniffin recalled.¹³ In San Francisco the climate became such that the chapter would hold its most sensitive discussions inside an old bank vault to elude the FBI, which was entrenched in the building directly across the street from its office.¹⁴

The Gainesville Eight trial had by far the most damaging effect on the organization’s health. Lasting from July 1972, when the defendants were first indicted, to August 1973, it crippled VVAW’s effectiveness in the South, exacerbated regional divisions between chapters, weakened the group’s finances, and tarnished its reputation nationally. However, before the trial’s ramifications were fully felt, VVAW sought to maintain its forward momentum by proposing an assortment of new projects aimed at empowering the underserved and ending the war in Vietnam. Despite having failed to recreate the magic of Dewey Canyon III in Miami, and

¹¹ John Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc., 1995), 289; Mike McCain, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 323.

¹² Jim Sargent to Bill [Hager?], March 20, 1973, Vietnam Veterans Against the War FBI Harassment file, Joseph A. Labadie Collection, University of Michigan Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan. (Hereafter cited as “JALC”).

¹³ Kniffin, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 324.

¹⁴ Thorn, interview with author, December 3, 2013.

fortify itself against the government's machinations, VVAW remained as robust and active as ever, most specifically at its grass roots.

Internal discussions about race largely eluded VVAW in its earliest configuration. With only “a half-dozen or so” African-American veterans counted as members in the late 1960s, the organization extended few overtures to minorities.¹⁵ VVAW's evolution into a mass movement of roughly 20,000 antiwar veterans by 1972 solidified the organization's working-class identity, but persons of color remained underrepresented.¹⁶ Aside from Al Hubbard, the evidence suggests few black veterans joined VVAW. Among the handful that did was Robert Hanson, a former helicopter door gunner, who worked in the national office and, later, the San Francisco chapter. Contemplating the reasons why VVAW attracted such little attention from African Americans, Hanson hypothesized that “a lot of black combat vets went into the [Black] Panthers,” transferring their military skills to the cause of black liberation.¹⁷ The imperialist implications of U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia had by the late 1960s struck a nerve with African-American GIs, several of whom spoke of sharing a common foe with the Vietnamese. As one

¹⁵ Thomas Corpora, “The Negro Veteran,” *The San Antonio Light*, June 27, 1968.

¹⁶ A 1971 survey, completed by 172 VVAWers, showed that nearly half the respondents (48.9 percent) were raised in blue collar families with occupations in industrial labor. Similarly, 23.2 percent reported working in an industrial labor position before entering the service; 22.1 percent were drafted while still in school; and 43.1 percent entered just after completing high school or college. These numbers are not surprising. Of the 2.5 million enlisted men who served in Vietnam, approximately 80 percent hailed from working-class and poor backgrounds. See Hamid Mowlana and Paul H. Geffert, “Vietnam Veterans Against the War: A Profile Study of the Dissenters,” (June 1971), in Kerry and VVAW, *New Soldier*, 172-174; Appy, *Working-Class War*, 6, 22-25.

¹⁷ Hanson, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 208-209. While the extent of Hanson's claim is ultimately unknowable, Black Panther Party historian Curtis Austin has confirmed that black Vietnam vets were vital contributors to the Party, and maintained an active presence in all thirty-two chapters. Unable to confirm exact statistics, Austin puts the figure in the “low one hundreds” with the caveat that “there could have been as many as five times that number” if oral histories with former Panthers are correct. See Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 101-102.

black Air Force sergeant opined: “I think the black man in Vietnam is definitely fighting two enemies. And he should *only* be at home fighting one.”¹⁸

Despite being militantly antiwar, the majority of black vets did not regard VVAW as a viable alternative to the more familiar civil rights and Black Power organizations available to them. Nevertheless, VVAW did what it could to make inroads into the African-American community and demonstrate its dedication to racial justice. In late August 1970, national office volunteer Jason Gettinger organized a vigil in Fort Pierce, Florida, where an all-white cemetery refused to bury the body of a black GI killed in Vietnam.¹⁹ Later that same year, in Operation RAW, VVAWers met in solidarity with the Baltimore-based Black Power group, Making A Nation (MAN), as it marched to the United Nations in protest of the alleged “racial genocide” in South Vietnam. To the veterans, whose own march sought to convey the government’s “view [of] the Vietnamese as less-than-human pawns in a war between superpowers,” the symmetry between the two demonstrations did not go unnoticed.²⁰ A month later, in October 1970, VVAW’s executive committee proposed the “Philadelphia Plan,” an experimental project that promised to send a “group of Vietnam Vets...into [the] black community on weekends to help clean up the ghetto.” As part of the program’s objective, veterans were advised to “live in the community so that the community can relate to what is being done. In this way,” the leadership hoped, “we will be able to make the connection between the anti-war movement and the black community; we can make it a ‘Singular War.’”²¹

¹⁸ Ken Bantum, quoted in Wallace Terry II, “Bringing the War Home,” in *Vietnam and Black America: An Anthology of Protest and Resistance*, ed. Clyde Taylor (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1973), 204; Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 99-104.

¹⁹ “Vets Plan Vigil for Black GI,” *New York Post*, August 26, 1970.

²⁰ “Antiwar Vietnam Veterans Finish 4-Day March”; “Operation RAW,” statement of purpose; Bill Crandell, “Impressions of Operation RAW,” n.d. (c. September 1970), in author’s possession.

²¹ Executive Committee Meeting, summary notes, October 27, 1970, Box 1, Folder 6, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

Noble as VVAW's efforts were, some questioned its level commitment to bridging this divide. At the Winter Soldier Investigation in Detroit, tensions flared as concerns were voiced about the absence of racism as a topic of discussion. The accusation was not entirely accurate. Participants spoke frankly about their treatment of the Vietnamese as a "subhuman" people, and how terms like "gook" robbed them of their "humanness."²² But still, even with such honesty, Winter Soldier failed to account for the diversity of experience among American GIs as it pertained to race. Although working-class whites with lower education levels often found themselves stationed in combat units on the front lines with blacks and other minorities, racial stereotyping generally eluded them.²³ The notion that lower-income whites carried any sort of racial status (e.g. white privilege) was likely curious to VVAWers who felt they faced "the same enemy" as all other Vietnam veterans — the government.²⁴ In an attempt to overturn this assumption, Barry Romo, the lone Chicano at the hearings, united with the few black, Asian, and Native American vets to form their own panel. "We demanded a panel on racism alone," he recalled. "We held the panel on what racism was to the Vietnamese, which was starting to come out, but also the question of racism against servicemen in the military. That was the first revolt against a sort of a more liberal antiwar view," he explained.²⁵

Others followed. In one of the event's more heated moments, an African-American veteran rapped with a group of white vets in the hotel lobby where the hearings were held about the need for a more thorough analysis of race. "The real issue is, man, the thing is racism. It's

²² Lt. Scott Moore, 9th Infantry Division, *Winter Soldier Investigation*, 152. See also L/Cpl. Scott Shimabukaro, 3rd Marine Division, Mike Nakayama, 1st Marine Division, and Sgt. Jim Weber, Americal Division, *ibid.*, 152-153, 157-159.

²³ Appy, *Working-Class War*, 18-19; Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt*, 200-210; Thomas M. Holm, "American Indian Veterans and the Vietnam War," in *The Vietnam Reader*, ed. Walter Capps (New York: Routledge, 1991), 193-194.

²⁴ *Winter Soldier*, DVD, prod. and dir. Winterfilm Cooperative (Harrington Park, NJ: Milliarium Zero, 2006; originally released in 1972).

²⁵ *Ibid.*; Romo, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 239.

racism,” he argued. “That’s how come you ain’t got no black people behind you, because you forgot about racism, man.” He urged VVAW to reach out and make itself relevant to the black community. “You gotta show ‘em that you are for real. You gotta suffer, man. You just can’t go out here and run your shit, man, and then let no blood when we bleeding everyday. You know, you gotta bleed with us, man.... Then you’ll have it together.”²⁶ To strength its resolve, VVAW’s national office made it an organizational objective in 1971 “[t]o show Americans that their society is structured by a racism which lets us view all non-whites as less than human.”²⁷

It would take time for VVAWers to wrestle with these issues, in some cases never resolving them. Chapters south of the Mason-Dixon Line often struggled the most. As John Lindquist explained, VVAW was “never closed. You had some left-wing dudes quoting Mao and you’d have dudes from down south talking about ‘fucking niggers’ at the same meeting. You had a whole bunch of right-wing dudes and you had a bigger group in the middle.”²⁸ Of course not all southern chapters were the same. In the summer of 1970 members of the soon-to-be Fort Hood-Killeen chapter marched as part of the Carl Hampton Brigade in Houston, Texas, to protest the murdered eponymous black radical.²⁹ At the rally, Terry DuBose, the future Texas state coordinator and former second lieutenant, delivered “a short talk about the racism around the draft and the war in Vietnam.”³⁰ Later, after the Texas vets officially joined VVAW, Austin’s John Kniffin developed a reputation as one of the region’s most effective educators on the evils of racism. As Annie Bailey later pointed out, “Some of the best antiracist raps came from people

²⁶ *Winter Soldier* (DVD).

²⁷ “Objectives of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Inc.,” *Ist Casualty*, August 1971, 12.

²⁸ Lindquist, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 292.

²⁹ Carl Hampton was a local activist in Houston’s African American community and founder of the Peoples Party II (PPII), a Black Power group formed in the image of the Black Panthers. He was shot and killed by a police sniper on July 26, 1970, after a heated standoff between PPII and the Houston Police Department ten days earlier. For more on the controversial killing, see Alkebulan, *Survival Pending Revolution*, 51.

³⁰ Terry DuBose to author, November 27, 2013.

like John Kniffin from Texas, who had this unique southern Texas drawl and this long red hair, and he was such a fucking redneck. He was a maniac, but he was good. I grew to love him.”³¹

In the aftermath of the Winter Soldier Investigation, signs of an anti-imperialist mindset began to crystalize in the national headquarters. By September 1971 personalities in the New York office could be found quoting Algerian radical Frantz Fanon, voicing their support for the Attica prison uprising, and demanding the cultivation of a “revolutionary consciousness.” Where ideology and theory had once precluded the organization, they were now becoming subjects of earnest conversation. “We must begin to develop a reading list and having discussions among staff about what we read,” urged the national office. “We have to understand Marx and Lenin and pull out the parts of their writings that are relevant and provide hope for mankind.”³² To overcome the “differences between...Third World peoples and white folks,” organizers immersed themselves in the myriad campaigns devoted to freeing political prisoners. Much of this stemmed from the veterans “identifying with the Vietnamese, as not only people who were being oppressed, but...[as] the ones who were right,” Bill Branson recalled. “We started to get an understanding of imperialism. We became anti-imperialist. We started to see that there was a rich class that was behind this. We saw that it wasn’t just going on in Vietnam. It was going on in the United States,” too.³³

Campaigns to free political prisoners thought to be detained by the state for their beliefs multiplied in the 1970s. Chapters from Southern California assumed leadership positions in the movements to liberate two high-profile defendants: Billy Dean Smith an outspoken black antiwar private charged with murdering two lieutenants and wounding a third with a fragmentation grenade at the Bien Hoa air base near Saigon on March 15, 1971; and Gary Lawton, an African-

³¹ Bailey, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 292.

³² “Staff Meeting Minutes,” September 22, 1971, 3, Box 1, Folder 23, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

³³ *Ibid.*, 3; Branson, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 351.

American community organizer from Riverside, California, accused of killing two police officers in an ambush on April 2, 1971. Charged with Lawton were two additional defendants, Nehemiah Jackson and Larrie Gardner, whose cases were later dropped after the first and second trials.³⁴ In each instance, the defendants' political leanings were thought to supersede the dubious evidence compiled against them. "The frame-up of Billy Smith," wrote the Monterey chapter, "is an attack on GI resistance, Black liberation, and the peoples' struggle for freedom, justice, and control over our own lives." Supporters of Gary Lawton arrived at a similar set of conclusions: "From the beginning it was clear that Lawton was being framed for his involvement in organizing Black moratoriums against the imperialist war in Indochina and for fighting against discrimination."³⁵ VVAW played an indispensable role in the Lawton case. After the second hung jury in February 1973, Barry Romo stepped down from his position as national VVAW coordinator to head up the Riverside Political Prisoners Defense Committee and assist with jury selection for Lawton's third and final trial. Elsewhere around the country VVAWers published articles on Smith and Lawton for their chapter newsletters, sponsored informational speaking tours, and led fund-raising drives to sustain the defendants through to their eventual acquittals.³⁶

As the Smith and Lawton cases garnered national attention, chapters outside California found their own *cause célèbres* to champion. In Kansas City, Missouri, members joined the

³⁴ "Gary Lawton" and "Billy Dean Smith," *Favorite Sons*, newsletter for VVAW's California-Hawaii-Nevada Region, vol. 1, no. 2, n.d. (probably March 1972), 4-5, in author's possession; Mark Z. Hartford, "A Freedom Fighter, A Brother, My Old Friend Remembered...Gary Lawton Has Died," *The Veteran* (Spring 2004), 27-28, 30.

³⁵ Monterey VVAW and Billy Smith Defense Committee to its supporters, August 23, [1972] Box 16, Folder 31; Johanna Kropp, "Lawton Acquitted," flyer, n.d. (May 1975), Box 16, Folder 10, VVAW Papers, WSHS. For a book-length treatment of the Lawton case, see Ben Bradlee Jr., *The Ambush Murders: The True Account of the Killing of Two California Policemen* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1979).

³⁶ Romo, interview with author, November 25, 2013; Hartford, "A Freedom Fighter," 27-28; "Resolution on Angela Davis, Billy Smith, and All Political Prisoners," California, November 1971, Box 2, Folder 21, VVAW Papers, WSHS. For more on the Smith trial, see *Sir! No Sir!*. For examples of VVAW newsletters relaying information about the Smith and Lawton cases, see St. Louis chapter, newsletter, n.d. (1973), Box 4, Folder 14; Long Beach Vietnam Veterans Against the War, newsletter, June 1972, 1-2, Box 3, Folder 6; Maryland-D.C.-Virginia Regional Newsletter, February 13, 1974, 1, Box 3, Folder 2; Cincinnati, Ohio, Regional Newsletter #10, March 1974, 1, Box 2, Folder 34, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

Leavenworth Brothers Offense/Defense Committee, a political alliance formed to support seven federal prisoners at the Leavenworth penitentiary facing charges ranging from mutiny to murder after a two hour prison rebellion on July 31, 1973. The riot stemmed from repeated attempts by prisoners to secure policy changes that would see greater religious freedom, more minority guards, and improved medical services. Working with others on the committee “to obtain justice” for the defendants, VVAW initiated a vigorous “public education program designed to expose the adverse conditions at Leavenworth and throughout the prison system.”³⁷ At a national steering committee meeting, VVAW made the Leavenworth Brothers a national priority. One defendant, Alf Hill, a black Vietnam veteran, even organized a large VVAW chapter within the prison.³⁸ As the Kansas City chapter buried itself in Leavenworth Brothers’ defense, members in the Chicago office began work on the case of Melvin X. Smith, a black GI charged with killing a white sergeant in Quang Tri, Vietnam, on May 7, 1971. From the outset things looked grim for the young GI. “Our analysis is that it is not a pretty case,” confessed Annie Smith, one of the activists working to build a defense fund. “[T]he man was apolitical, is now a Muslim, and has both mental illness and osteomyelitis, which will kill him if the military doesn’t.”³⁹ Despite Smith’s rather bleak assessment, the campaign generated considerable interest in the Midwest where regional coordinators voted to make it a focal point of chapter activism, stating: “Folks are

³⁷ “Support the Leavenworth Brothers,” brochure published by the Leavenworth Brothers Offense/Defense Committee, n.d. (1974), Box 16, Folder 13, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

³⁸ “Community Unites in Prison Struggle,” Leavenworth Brothers Offense/Defense Committee Newsletter, January 29, 1974, 2, Box 16, Folder 13; “Justice in America: How it Really Works,” Leavenworth Brothers Offense/Defense Committee Newsletter 1, no. 4, n.d. (1974), Box 4, Folder 12, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

³⁹ Annie Smith to Alexander Ben, December 4, 1973, 2, Box 16, Folder 32, VVAW Papers, WSHS. For more on Melvin Smith, see Carrie Ballinger, “Army Exploits G.I.,” *Columbus Free Press*, n.d. (c. late 1973-early 1974), 5, found in Box 16, Folder 37, VVAW Papers, WSHS; “Melvin X. Faces Hearing,” *Winter Soldier* 4, no. 1 (January 1974), 12; “Chicago GI Facing Second Trial for Viet Slaying of Noncom,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 7, 1974; “Chicago GI Sentenced to 8 Years for Slaying,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 14, 1974.

really interested in this case and it has been really easy for us to get people to sign the petitions.”⁴⁰

With resources stretched thin, and no shortage of causes, VVAWers played to the strengths of their regions. In the Southwest and Midwest, staff coordinators built political alliances with the Chicano and Native American Indian movements. The Colorado-Utah-Wyoming region proved a natural nesting ground for this activity, decorating their newsletters with aboriginal art and extending chapter support to local causes.⁴¹ On March 17, 1974, organizers urged veterans to attend the “Crusade for Justice” rally in Denver and “stand together around the political and racist repression that the Chicano community faces.” Two months later, VVAWers joined the United Farm Workers’ Union (UFW), a vital organization in the cultivation of Chicano consciousness, in Broomfield, Colorado, for a picket at the neighborhood Safeway Store in solidarity with the group’s ongoing boycott of non-union iceberg lettuce.⁴² In Dayton, Ohio, regional coordinator Gary Staiger met with UFW representatives and explained the boycott’s significance to his constituents. “The struggle against the forces that dominate our country is not a singular struggle, it is a struggle that has many facets, [and] in order to win, we must all STRUGGLE TOGETHER,” he insisted.⁴³ It was in this same spirit that VVAW lent its support to the American Indian Movement (AIM) and its 1973 blockade of Wounded Knee, a small hamlet in South Dakota. Midwestern chapters took a keen interest in the siege — first

⁴⁰ Gary [Staiger] to Emily and Ellie, December 3, 1973, Box 16, Folder 32, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁴¹ See Colorado-Utah-Wyoming Regional VVAW/WSO, Hoa Binh Newsletter #1, January 1974, 1-3, Box 2 Folder 23; Colorado-Utah-Wyoming Regional VVAW/WSO, Hoa Binh Newsletter #3, March 1974, 1-2, Box 2, Folder 23, VVAW Papers, WSHS. The acronym “VVAW/WSO” stands for Vietnam Veterans Against the War/Winter Soldier Organization. In spring 1973, VVAW temporarily changed its name to be more inclusive to the many non-veterans, particularly women, who by this time had become key contributors to the group. For more on this development, see Chapter Five.

⁴² Phil Reser and Pat Himes, “Press Statement at Crusade for Justice,” February 28, 1974, Box 2, Folder 23; Colorado VVAW/WSO, summary of a two-day march from Boulder to Denver, May 31-June 1, 1974, Box 2, Folder 23, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁴³ Gary Staiger, Dayton, Ohio, Newsletter #25, July 28, 1972, 2, Box 5, Folder 6, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

initiated to draw attention to the pathetic living-conditions at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation — funneling food and medical supplies to the occupiers. After seventy-one days the blockade came to an end. VVAWers continued to assist AIM by running regular updates on the ensuing trials in their national newspaper (re-christened *Winter Soldier*) and establishing open lines of communication with the Wounded Knee Legal Defense/Offense Committee.⁴⁴

Racial justice formed the core of each of these campaigns. Through them VVAW aimed to unmask racism's "broader historical and social context — as a tool to keep the people down and divided" — and advance "the general struggle for Black and Third World Liberation."⁴⁵ National coordinator Al Hubbard saw this is a natural path for VVAW to take if it hoped to remain a "viable" force of progressive change in America. "Become involved with others in your community," he advised its members, "and remember that you have been a member of the community for a long time whereas you were in Vietnam for a relatively short time.... Don't get hung up on being a veteran."⁴⁶ Only by uniting in camaraderie with other oppressed groups could VVAW truly halt the government's abuses, more VVAWers started to believe. "Every day the crimes against the people increase and they will continue to increase until we get our shit together," stated one vet. "We must learn that the interest of one is the interest of all. We must struggle in solidarity against the forces of racism and repression, we must rise up as one against the capitalist, imperialist, inhumanity of this fascist government."⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Chuck Logan and Jeff Roy, "An Open Letter to Minnesota Vietnam Era Veterans," n.d. (November 1973), Box 4, Folder, 10; "AIM Leaders Railroaded," *Viet Minn*, newsletter for VVAW/WSO Minnesota, vol. 1, no. 2 (July 1975), 1, 4, Box 4, Folder 10; Len Cavise, for the Wounded Knee Legal Defense/Offense Committee, to VVAW/WSO, August 17, 1973, Box 17, Folder 13, VVAW Papers, WSHS. For a lively account of the Wounded Knee protest, see Bill Zimmerman, *Troublemaker: A Memoir from the Front Lines of the Sixties* (New York: Doubleday, 2011), 312-354.

⁴⁵ Monterey VVAW and Billy Smith Defense Committee.

⁴⁶ Hubbard, "A Viable VVAW," 2.

⁴⁷ "Attica," *1st Casualty* 1, no. 2 (October 1971), 1.

To this end, chapters broadened their grassroots activism beyond the realm of veteran care to address those concerns afflicting their communities. In 1972, Detroit members volunteered at a chicken farm run by a former labor organizer and donated the eggs given to them as payment to the local Black Panther Party's free breakfast program to feed inner-city school children. They also collected boxes of "good free clothes" for distribution to the needy.⁴⁸ Around the same time, the Brooklyn chapter, inspired by the Panthers' health care projects, established a provisional testing program to address the rampant problem of lead poisoning in their neighborhood. Community nurse and longtime VVAW supporter, Ann Hirschman, spearheaded the initiative.⁴⁹ No region was left untouched. In Austin, Texas, VVAWers decided to refocus their outreach in early 1972 and provide tangible services to the community. "We cannot continue to exist if we are constantly asking the community to support us without providing any return for their investment of time and resources," they concluded. Writing to the other Texas area coordinators, the Austin chapter proposed establishing their own drug rehab centers, joining striking workers on picket lines, and building connections with active duty GIs across the state. Its most unusual proposal: "VVAW Pest Control." "There is a real need in most communities for some sort of pest control service," the Austin vets explained. "VVAW could fulfill that need and then follow up with a 'peoples advocate' who would go into the homes and talk about...why VVAW is able to supply a service free of charge while the government cannot in spite of all the money the government receives from taxes on individuals and families."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Detroit chapter to the national office, likely written by Bill Marshall, March 20, 1972, Box 4, Folder 9, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁴⁹ Ann Hirschman, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 266. For more on the Black Panther Party's survival programs, see Alkebulan, *Survival Pending Revolution*, 27-45.

⁵⁰ Austin Area VVAW to Area Coordinators, Texas VVAW, January 5, 1972, Box 2, Folder 36, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

Building on similar priorities, VVAW's Operation Lifeline to Cairo, launched in June 1971, saw the organization expand this community-service ethic into a national drive to aid the subaltern black population in Cairo, Illinois. Situated at the state's southernmost tip, where the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers converge, Cairo was an economically destitute city with a history of racial strife. Seething tensions reached a breaking point in July 1967 after the jailhouse death of a black soldier arrested on charges of being AWOL touched off three days of violent protest. Bombs exploded razing a gasoline station warehouse and damaging three retail stores and a merchandise depot. The destruction of white-owned property was as much an expression of outrage over the soldier's suspicious death (the coroner ruled it a suicide) as it was a response to the city's legacy of segregation. "We have no jobs, we have no recreational facilities, we have no dialogue with the community's elected officials," the protesters lamented.⁵¹ For two years the situation continued to degenerate. Violent guerrilla skirmishes instigated by bands of white marauders, several of them deputized by the sheriff, kept the city in a state of siege as they cruised through black neighborhoods brandishing shotguns and rifles, with bumper stickers on their cars that read, "Cairo, love it or leave it." African-American residents retaliated by joining with the United Front, a local civil rights coalition, and staged a boycott against white businesses to protest black unemployment and the rise in vigilante terror.⁵² Over a twenty-six-month period, approximately 174 shots were fired into the black community leaving four African Americans dead and several whites wounded.⁵³

VVAW was first alerted to the conditions in Cairo in December 1970. Bobby Morgan, a former VISTA worker and representative of the United Front, took Arkansas state coordinator,

⁵¹ "'We knew it was coming'—Riots Result of Complex Issues," *Southern Illinoisan*, July 20, 1967; "Bombings Rock Cairo," *Southern Illinoisan*, July 17, 1967.

⁵² Donald Johnson, "Cairo, Ill., Divided By Racial Conflict; City Fears Future," *New York Times*, June 23, 1969; "Troubles Mount for Cairo, Ill., A Town Divided," *Hutchinson News*, June 25, 1969.

⁵³ Scott Moore, "Lifeline to Cairo," *Ist Casualty* 1, no. 1 (August, 1971), 3.

Don Donner, and a few other vets with him to smuggle Christmas presents into the city. After surveying the scene, which looked to Donner like a war zone, national coordinators Scott Moore, Al Hubbard, and Jon Birch arrived for a civil rights rally on June 19, 1971, at Morgan's behest.⁵⁴ Their impressions mirrored those of Donner's. "The situation in Cairo is bad, if not worse than any of us realized. It differs from Vietnam only by the fact that it is 12,000 miles away," they reflected.⁵⁵ At a national meeting in St. Louis, VVAW coordinators discussed plans for running convoys of supplies into Cairo. Since the ongoing boycott meant that the black community remained relatively dependent on outsiders for basic provisions, VVAWers were asked by the United Front to assemble packages of canned foods, clothing, and medicine. Later in the summer, they launched a book drive to assist in getting the community's burgeoning black studies program off the ground.⁵⁶ Electricians, plumbers, carpenters, bakers, engineers, and doctors were also solicited as part of training program Morgan concocted to help teach Cairo's black population the necessary skills required to attain complete self-sufficiency.⁵⁷ The push for black autonomy in Cairo dovetailed with VVAW's own suspicions of authority. "The government of this country has justified [the war in Vietnam] by saying that we are fighting for freedom and equality and self-determination for the Vietnamese and yet here in our own country people are denied that right and are involved in a struggle to obtain that right; their struggle is our struggle," Moore concluded.⁵⁸

Chapters responded to the project differently. Several organized mass donation drives and sent large packages to the St. Louis veterans charged with organizing and directing the

⁵⁴ Saunders, *Combat by Trial*, 134-135. For a nice profile of Bobby Morgan, see Marvin Schwartz, *In Service to America: A History of VISTA in Arkansas, 1965-1985* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1988), 161-169.

⁵⁵ Scott Moore, Al Hubbard, and Jon Birch, memo to steering committee, June 26, 1971, 1, Box 1, Folder 5, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 3; Moore, "Report to the Executive Committee," 1.

⁵⁷ Moore, "Lifeline to Cairo," 3; Saunders, *Combat by Trial*, 133-134.

⁵⁸ Moore, "Lifeline to Cairo," 3.

shipments. Others questioned the leadership's insistence on making it a national objective. Moore sensed as much as he toured the country visiting different chapters in the summer of 1971. "Cairo was not enthusiastically received by the coordinators I talked to," he observed. "They felt it was viable, but they had their own problems" to tend to. As such, he doubted whether VVAW "could generate enough interest for a national action around Cairo again."⁵⁹ There was also the issue of being compelled to join a program that rubbed some members the wrong way. The New England chapters, for one, expressed some reluctance about designating Operation Cairo a national project and insisted that it "should be dealt with by individual chapters at their own discretion." At a regional caucus meeting in July, the New England vets asserted their preference for autonomous self-rule by holding a vote on whether to participate in the program. With a two-thirds majority they agreed, but on the condition that they "relate to Cairo through the Black United Front of Boston," a seemingly independent Black Power group familiar with the situation in southern Illinois.⁶⁰ The decision to contribute to Operation Cairo on these terms was not incidental, but indicative of the membership's larger temperament. "VVAW is an anarchist organization," Arkansas' Don Donner said. "None of us ever wants to have to take anybody's orders ever again.... The less government, the better."⁶¹

Disagreements aside, Moore's grim premonitions about the fate of Operation Cairo never came to pass. Midway through the summer, the first VVAW convoy rolled into the beleaguered city. Crowds of supporters stood in "applause" as incredulous whites shot confused glares at the veterans' convoy driving down the "main drag." "[They] didn't how to react to

⁵⁹ Moore, "Report to the Executive Committee," 1.

⁶⁰ New York office, staff meeting minutes, July 20, 1971, 1, Box 1, Folder 23; New England VVAW, newsletter, n.d. (early July 1971), Box 4, Folder 7; New England VVAW, meeting agenda, July 28, 1971, Box 4, Folder 7, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁶¹ Saunders, *Combat by Trial*, 226.

this,” an observer stated.⁶² Over the next two years VVAW made several more supply runs into Cairo, with members in Kansas, Missouri, and Illinois enthusiastically adopting the venture as their own.⁶³

Outside the Midwest, grassroots programs intended to bolster black liberation continued to thrive, especially in the field of health care. In 1971, VVAW national officer Mike Oliver proposed the creation of a free health clinic in Harlem as an alternative to the “fragmented, depersonalized acute care” black and Puerto Rican residents received “from the existing medical institutions.” Cognizant of the group’s depleted funds, Oliver suggested that “veteran health workers” use the facility as a base “to provide health surveillance, education and aid in the neighborhood,” rather than replicate those services already offered by hospital clinics. Focused on prevention, veterans were expected to “perform health, sanitation and safety inspections” of patients’ dwellings; “conduct health education classes in the areas of nutrition, baby care, drugs, sex, lead poisoning, sanitation, alcoholism, etc.”; and “act as a patient advocate...easing accessibility to the system.”⁶⁴ The clinic was proposed with the same preference for localism and community control as VVAW’s own R&R farms and halfway houses. “Because involvement with the community is essential, planning must be done with any and all indigenous community groups involved in the health movement,” Oliver asserted. “Any compromise with this approach, I feel, would inevitably reproduce the patronizing style of the medical institutions and will ultimately alienate people.”⁶⁵

⁶² New York office, staff meeting minutes, August 17, 1971, 1, Box 1, Folder 23, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁶³ Illinois-Eastern Missouri Regional Office, newsletter, n.d. (c. May 1972), Box 4, Folder 15; Kansas City chapter, “Round Robin Report,” n.d. (c. December 1972-January 1973), Box 4, Folder 12; “Round Robin Reports” for Kansas/Western Missouri and Southern Illinois/Eastern Missouri, in National Steering Committee Minutes, Placitas, New Mexico, April 19-23, 1973, 2, Box 1, Folder 12, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁶⁴ Mike Oliver, “Functions of a VVAW Clinic in Harlem,” n.d. (c. mid-1971), 1, 5, 6, Box 8, Folder 35, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

While it is not known whether the clinic ever came to fruition, its basic premise was later replicated in Bogue Chitto, Alabama, a small, mostly black, hamlet located fifteen miles west of Salem. There the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Clinic was incorporated to provide free “medical, dental, psychological, social and related services to anyone requesting them.” Its objectives were ambitious: to fill a void in a community where most residents either declined medical attention until absolutely necessary or ventured to Salem where they received substandard care in segregated facilities.⁶⁶ News of these conditions reached VVAW in August 1972 at the Republican National Convention in Miami. There among the throngs of activists camped out in Flamingo Park VVAW coordinators met representatives of the People’s Farm, a small collective living in Bogue Chitto on a ten acre plot of land donated by a black civil rights supporter from Selma. As transplants to the area, they relayed the need for adequate health care and invited the southern California brigade to visit the farm on their return home. After surveying the situation firsthand, both the California and Alabama regions adopted a “program to provide medical aid for the people of Boca Chita [*sic*]...and to establish a permanent clinic within the community.” A few months later, at a national steering committee meeting in Chicago, “Operation County Fair” was designated a national project tasked with strengthening VVAW’s “bonds of solidarity...with the black brothers and sisters of Boca Chita and Third World Peoples nationally.”⁶⁷

Initial support for the project proved encouraging. Chapters from California, Massachusetts, Ohio, and North Carolina gathered packages of medical supplies for the fledgling

⁶⁶ Articles of Incorporation of Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Clinic, April 7, 1973, 1, Box 13, Folder 1; E.A. Maddox, M.D., Clinic Director, “Preliminary Proposal: Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Clinic,” n.d. (c. mid-1973), 1-2, Box 13, Folder 1, VVAW, Papers, WSHS.

⁶⁷ “County Fair” was the military term used by U.S. forces in Vietnam for the medical aid programs conducted as part of its campaign to “pacify” the countryside. The veterans appropriated the term ironically. Operation County Fair Newsletter, February 1974, 3, Box 13, Folder 1; W.T. [Bill] Hager, “Operation County Fair,” n.d. (c. January 1973), 1,2, Box 12, Folder 35; “Operation County Fair (OCF),” proposal passed at the National Steering Committee Meeting, Chicago, January 4-8, 1973, Box 13, Folder 1, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

clinic as veterans in Chicago toiled for long hours in pursuit of potential donors to build a solid financial base. Floor plans drafted by the Alabama chapter projected a smart interior complete with a waiting room, multiple examination rooms, a laboratory, and pharmacy. In the interim they settled on a modest white frame house leased to the project organizers without cost. “We hope to expand this small, four-room building with a brick structure when funds became available,” national officer Richard Bangert informed a potential supporter.⁶⁸ Slowly, money trickled in and by September 1973 construction had commenced. Members from New York, Illinois, Missouri, Wisconsin, and Florida visited the site intermittently to assist the Bogue Chitto community with flooring, windowing casing, and insulation.⁶⁹ Others busied themselves in the community training health workers, securing contacts with sympathetic doctors, and screening patients for high blood pressure, venereal disease, malnutrition, anemia, and tuberculosis. For those requiring urgent care they launched a temporary “immediate aid station,” provided transportation to clinics in Salem, and volunteered as “health advocates” for “patients in need of proper and prompt treatment with follow-up.”⁷⁰ Registered nurses Linda Regnier and Diane Schmidt were instrumental in these efforts.

Gradually, outreach extended beyond the clinic and into the surrounding counties. Consistent with other VVAW chapters, members of the “Bogue Chitto collective” circulated the *Winter Soldier* newspaper, gathered signatures in support of political prisoners, rapped about the United Farm Workers’ grape and lettuce boycotts, and explored the possibility of organizing GIs

⁶⁸ “Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Clinic,” informational pamphlet, n.d. (1973), 1-2, Box 13, Folder 1; Richard Bangert to Robert S. Hogan, M.D., December 1, 1973, Box 12, Folder 35, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁶⁹ Alabama-Mississippi-Tennessee Region ,Newsletter, n.d. (c. May 1973), 3, Box 2, Folder 20; Alabama-Mississippi-Tennessee Region, Newsletter #25, July 12, 1973, 3, Box 2, Folder 20; Alabama-Mississippi-Tennessee Region, Newsletter #27, September 17, 1973, 1, Box 2, Folder 20; “Chicago Log of Communication,” May 1973, Box 13, Folder 1, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁷⁰ Maddox, “Preliminary Proposal,” 1; “Operation County Fair (OCF),” 1, 2; Bill Edwards, untitled article on the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Clinic, n.d. (1973), 2, Box 13, Folder 1; Linda Regnier to the national office, “OCF Report,” November 8, 1973, Box 12, Folder 35; “Operation County Fair,” informational pamphlet, n.d. [May 1974], 2, Box 13, Folder 1, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

at the nearby Craig Air Force Base.⁷¹ In late October 1973, plans for “a joint, pre-Christmas food-clothes-toy drive for Cairo/Bogue Chitto” were proposed and, after some debate, approved by VVAW and the United Front. The sluggish response from chapters outside the Midwest and California delayed the convoy’s arrival until January when the St. Louis chapter, after having completed the drive to Cairo, delivered “a truckload of clothing to Bogue Chitto.” It had been “the second large shipment of clothing sponsored by [VVAW] in the Midwest in the past year.” With these contributions, the collective opened the Bogue Chitto Mall, a small thrift store to assist in financing the clinic. The St. Louis chapter also donated an ambulance to help transport patients to and from Salem.⁷²

Similar to Operation Cairo, the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Clinic aspired to combat racism and strengthen black independence. “Health care [institutions] should be deprofessionalized,” its organizers argued, and “governed by the people who use and work in them.”⁷³ The clinic’s board of directors, composed almost entirely of residents from the community, had been elected to ensure this vision. Its medical training programs, led in part by registered doctors, nurses, and paramedics from neighboring counties, functioned with the same intent. “By doing that,” community health worker Idella Taylor explained, “we decided that we would try to help our people to try to help themselves in solving those kind of things that they

⁷¹ “Operation County Fair Report,” National Steering Committee Meeting, Yellow Springs, Ohio, December 27-31, 1973, 2, Box 1, Folder 13, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁷² Richard Bangert to the VVAW/WSO Bogue Chitto Collective, October 29, 1973, Box 12, Folder 35; Bill Hager to Rich Bangert, November 1, 1973, Box 12, Folder 35; Rich Bangert to regional coordinators, November 10, 1973, Box 12, Folder 35; Operation County Fair Newsletter, February 1974, 1, Box 13, Folder 1; Malinda Pittman, interviewed by Jan Hillegas, in “We Did It Ourselves,” n.d. (1974), 4, Box 13, Folder 1, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁷³ “[Free Clinic] Principles,” n.d. [c. April 1973], 1, Box 13, Folder 1, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

had been receiving from those doctors [in Selma].” VVAW’s Scott Rehmer concurred. “The idea is to teach them to take care of most of their troubles and work in the clinic,” he said.⁷⁴

What began as a high-spirited campaign to fight racist health care practices had, within two years, run its course. Unrealistic expectations contributed to the outcome, beginning with the organizers’ misapprehensions about the costs of construction and the inconsistent output of a volunteer workforce.⁷⁵ Indifference also took its toll. Black residents expressed interest in the clinic, but not enough to make it their own. They had difficulty relating to a radical white organization that did not share the community’s “mores and norms.”⁷⁶ VVAWers eventually expressed their own misgivings. Members in the Midwest and South spoke for many in the group when they criticized the project, pointing out that “poor health-care is not confined to Bogue Chitto alone, and it is very difficult, if not impossible to request funds, clothes[,] equipment, etc., for OCF when local communities have the same needs and problems.” In many ways, this was just window dressing for the veterans’ apathy. While resources were no doubt hard to come by, it was not as if they were creating a Bogue Chitto clinic in every city and town with a VVAW chapter. On August 24, 1974, the organization voted to suspend its involvement in the clinic, still under construction. The national office summarized its efforts as “good” intentioned but politically “immature.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Maddox, “Preliminary Proposal,” 1; Idella M. Taylor, interview, “We Did It Ourselves,” 6-7; Frank Sikora, “Antiwar Vets Plan Poor People’s Clinic at Bogue Chitto,” newspaper clipping from the *Birmingham News*, n.d. (February 1974), Box 12, Folder 35, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁷⁵ Early projections estimated \$5,000 for construction costs. Actual expenses, as determined by Kent Drafting Service, a Tuscaloosa-based firm, were priced closer to \$20,000. Hager, “Operation County Fair,” 3; Robbie L. Kent, Kent Drafting Service, material cost estimate for the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Clinic, March 13, 1973, Box 12, Folder 35, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁷⁶ P.D. to Rich [Bangert], May 24, 1974, 4.

⁷⁷ Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, West Virginia, Western Pennsylvania, Round Robin Report, August 1974, 1, Box 2, Folder 34; Richard Bangert to the Board of Directors, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Clinic, August 24, 1974, 1, Box 12, Folder 36, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

Even with the troubles associated with Operation County Fair, decline did not come immediately for VVAW. Along with the explosion of activism related to racial justice, chapters made reaching out to active-duty GIs a chief priority after Dewey Canyon III. The decision to do so likely stemmed from the flurry of chapter activity in states like Texas, California, and Ohio, where veterans cut their teeth as antiwar activists organizing in and around military bases often prior to their involvement in VVAW. Such was the case for Lee Thorn and Jack McCloskey who in 1970, about a year before joining VVAW, opened a GI coffeehouse outside the Oakland Army Base called the “Pentagon.” Oakland being a key military debarkation point, the Pentagon focused on reaching out to curious and lonely soldiers. “This was a place where GIs could come in and we could talk to them about things like KP, guard duty, foxholes, shit like that. Our goals were to basically educate young men going to Vietnam,” McCloskey recalled.⁷⁸ Veterans ran the Pentagon for roughly two years, making it into an antiwar USO complete with free food and live music. Politics, however, were secondary to the larger mission of just being there for the soldiers, insisted McCloskey. “We knew where they were coming from. We had been in their position. If they wanted things, if they wanted a lawyer, if they wanted a safe house, if they wanted to go AWOL, sure, we would help them. But we never pushed. We let them make their decisions,” he said.⁷⁹

By 1970 a thriving network of GI coffeehouses were up and running in the United States. Plans for the first GI coffeehouse were launched in late 1967 by Fred Gardner, a former reservist and editor of the *Harvard Crimson*, who concluded that soldiers needed a recreational environment apart from the traditional military barracks where they could relax and openly discuss the war in Vietnam without fear of punitive reprisals. Using \$10,000 of his own money,

⁷⁸ McCloskey, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 215.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 215-216.

Gardner moved to Columbia, South Carolina, near Fort Jackson, and opened the “UFO,” an antiwar storefront located in the downtown. From there, he founded two additional projects, the “Oleo Strut,” in Killeen, Texas, and “Mad Anthony Wayne’s,” in Waynesville, Missouri, touching off what participant-observer David Cortright called a “GI coffeehouse movement.”⁸⁰ As anticipated, these establishments became instant hotbeds of antiwar activism for veterans and soldiers. VVAWers close to Killeen worked extensively with Oleo Strut staffers to generate antiwar activities around the nearby Fort Hood military base. “Texas VVAW had a close relationship and friends at the Oleo Strut. May have been closer than any other state’s VVAW had with a GI Coffee House,” said Terry DuBose, who taught classes and silk-screened protest signs and T-shirts at the facility.⁸¹ Throughout 1971, the two groups collaborated on a variety of projects, including the spring boycott of Tyrell’s Jewelers, a nationwide chain whose manipulative sales techniques deliberately targeted GIs, and VVAW’s Christmas protest, Operation Peace on Earth. For the latter initiative, veterans used floor plans provided by antiwar soldiers to sneak into the Fort Hood hospital and distribute books to patients with illicit “Oleo Strut literature folded between the pages.” “It took the MPs [military police] about 5 hours to round everyone up,” DuBose remembered. “It took them another 2-3 hours to write and sign letters to each VVAW member banning us from Ft. Hood for life.”⁸²

Beyond the coffeehouse movement, veterans engaged antiwar GIs in other ways as well. Before joining VVAW in early 1971, California’s Barry Romo was a student at San Bernardino Valley Community College, a progressive campus where several antiwar veterans had enrolled. “We gravitated instantly toward speaking out,” said Romo, and made connecting with active

⁸⁰ Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt*, 53.

⁸¹ DuBose to author, November 27, 2013.

⁸² *Ibid.*

duty soldiers a main objective.⁸³ With the multitude of military bases in the area, the decision had a definite logic to it. In groups they distributed leaflets, volunteered at GI drop-in centers, organized barbecues, and assisted soldiers in producing their own underground newspapers. The emergence of a radical, decentralized GI press in 1968 had done much to sustain the spread of antiwar activity throughout the Armed Forces. With varying degrees of sophistication, GIs used mimeograph machines to print and publish their papers in secret under the threat of punishment from the military brass. Between 1967 and 1974, nearly three hundred different publications had passed through the hands of American soldiers, many of them in operation for only a few short months.⁸⁴ Because these newspapers were so vital to the GI antiwar movement — carving out anti-hierarchical spaces for soldiers to ask questions about Vietnam and commiserate about life in the military — Romo and the other San Bernardino vets aided in the publishing of different papers to ensure their survival. From there they started networking, connecting with similar GI projects in Long Beach and San Diego where giant Marine bases dotted the landscape. By 1971, this loose federation of antiwar veterans formed the backbone of VVAW's presence in southern California.⁸⁵

After Operation Last Patrol, more VVAW chapters started to dedicate themselves to the cause of GI resistance. Prompting this trend was the NOSCAM project, VVAW's National Office for Service-Peoples' Counseling and Materials program, established in July 1972. With only a handful of chapters formally engaged in the GI struggle, national leaders established the NOSCAM office in Dayton, Ohio, with the aim of making it a "liaison between GI movement organizations and VVAW."⁸⁶ The decision to pair NOSCAM with the Dayton VVAW was no

⁸³ Romo, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 218.

⁸⁴ Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt*, 54-55.

⁸⁵ Romo, interview with author, November 25, 2013.

⁸⁶ Dayton, Ohio, Newsletter #15, July 28, 1972, 3, Box 5, Folder 6, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

accident. Ohio regional coordinator, Gary Staiger, had already proven to be a model organizer in this regard, effectively building his Dayton chapter around the nearby Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. Like his colleagues in Texas and California, Staiger understood early on the value of helping to sustain an underground GI movement. In the fall of 1971, his chapter revived the Wright-Patterson antiwar newspaper, *Star Spangled Bummer*, which originally folded after four issues. According to Staiger, “The importance of a publication like the Bummer on a military base cannot be underestimated. It provides a vehicle for GI’s to talk with each other, raises consciousness, stimulates interest, and, among other things, makes the brass verry verry uptight.”⁸⁷ To strengthen GI participation in the newspaper’s production, and foster more durable relations between VVAW and active-duty soldiers, Staiger moved the chapter’s office into the Dayton Draft & Military Counseling Center, known as “Ground Zero,” so that “GI’s from W-P and other areas could come and meet with us to work on the Bummer, read, have discussion groups, etc.”⁸⁸

Like newspapers, veterans took advantage of radio — particularly in the form of grassroots community-empowered stations — to beam their message to the public. The Dayton chapter developed its own two-hour radio program in August 1971 called Radio Free Wright-Patterson, made possible by the region’s community radio station, WYSO-FM, in Yellow Springs, Ohio. In its first months on air, the veterans featured interviews with a conscientious objector from Wright-Patterson, a patient at the Dayton VA hospital, and frank discussions about military justice, Post-Vietnam Syndrome, and the war’s trajectory. The show lasted until the spring of 1972 and was revived a year later under the name Radio Free Armed Forces, promising its listeners “news of the GI movement, veterans, the war, Wright-Patterson, and some good

⁸⁷ DVAW, Newsletter #3, 1-2.

⁸⁸ DVAW, Newsletter #4, November 1971, 1, Box 5, Folder 6, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

music.”⁸⁹ The project thrived for the next couple years, taking much of “its direction and support...from the people of the community.” With community and college radios stations experiencing something of a boom in the 1970s, chapters in Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts, picked up on the idea and produced their own one-hour radio program, “Radio Free VVAW,” from the M.I.T. campus station, WTBS-FM. Previously, they had a fifteen minute weekly segment on a local Boston station.⁹⁰

While projects like Radio Free Armed Forces and the *Star Spangled Bummer* were unique to Dayton, chapters across Ohio actively contributed to the GI struggle between 1972 and 1974. Military counseling became a very popular method of outreach among VVAWers in Columbus. In 1973, veterans converted their office into a gathering point for “all GIs (active duty, reservists, and ROTC members)” to inform them “of their legal rights, how to avoid hassles, and ways to legally press charges against the brass and other high ranking individuals that take advantage of your situation.” Training sessions for military counseling were offered in Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati, where beginning in February 1974 members also ran the Winter Soldier Coffeehouse “featuring music, films, political discussion and all-around good feelings.”⁹¹ As early as 1971 the Dayton group had expressed interest in military counseling, providing its members with copies of “The Military Counselors Handbook” and working with the Dayton Draft & Military Counseling Center. Within two years, the chapter had taken over the counseling center as its own project and aggressively increased its outreach. To better serve their constituents they ran public service announcements on local radio stations, placed advertisements

⁸⁹ DVAW, Newsletter #3, 2; Columbus, Ohio, Newsletter, n.d. (c. April 1973), 4, Box 5, Folder 5; Dayton, Ohio, Regional Report, December 14, 1974, 6, Box 2, Folder 34; “Radio Free Armed Forces,” flyer, n.d. (June 1973), Box 2, Folder 34, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁹⁰ Dayton, Regional Report, 6; New England VVAW, meeting agenda, July 28, 1971; VVAW New England Region, newsletter, February 1972, 6, Box 2, Folder 28, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁹¹ Ohio-North Kentucky, Regional Newsletter #10, 2; Columbus, Ohio, “Newsletter,” November 1973, 4, Box 5, Folder 5; DVAW, Newsletter #4, 1; Ohio-Indiana-Kentucky Region, Newsletter #19, October 13, 1972, 3, Box 2, Folder 34, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

in underground newspapers, leafleted the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, and hung posters in counterculture “head” shops with slogans like “No man is good enough to be another man’s master!”⁹² As part of their counseling service, VVAWers made their politics and objectives plain. “Our ideological positions range from civil libertarian to socialist to anarchist,” they stated. “We...believe that if we are ever to be free of oppressive institutions, such as the military, we must actively resist them.”⁹³

As VVAW’s NOSCAM initiative gained momentum, eventually opening a second office on the West Coast, some members sought to extend their support to antiwar GIs outside the contiguous United States. After learning that a small group of active-duty soldiers were planning on going AWOL once their carrier reached Hawaii, San Francisco’s Lee Thorn went down to provide assistance. “We got word from these guys that a bunch of them were gonna try to jump ship in Hawaii because it’s cool,” Thorn later laughed. “So I went over to see what I could do — if anything needed to be done with local VVAW guys, or former VVAW guys, that would facilitate their actions.” Working from a GI coffeehouse in Honolulu, he helped set up safe houses for the deserters.⁹⁴ As the war continued, VVAW strengthened its relations with soldiers stationed abroad. On U.S. installations throughout the Pacific southeast antiwar GI projects folded into VVAW chapters, extending the group’s network to Japan, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Most of these chapters worked independently of the organization, relying on indigenous antiwar movements for their day-to-day operations and the veterans as important points of contact in cases like truancy.⁹⁵ One of the few exceptions was Vietnam,

⁹² DVAW, Newsletter #4, 1; “Report on the VVAW/WSO Military Project #2,” in Dayton VVAW/WSO News, Newsletter #17, July 14, 1973, 6, Box 5, Folder 6; Dayton VVAW/WSO, sample public service announcements, n.d. (1973), Box 5, Folder 6; Day Draft & Military Counseling Center (VVAW/WSO), flyer, n.d. (c. November 1974), Box 5, Folder 6, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁹³ “Who Are We?,” flyer, n.d. (c. November 1974), Box 5, Folder 6, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁹⁴ Thorn, interview with author, December 3, 2013; Thorn, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 217.

⁹⁵ Romo, interview with author, November 25, 2013; Thorn, interview with author, December 3, 2013.

where VVAW had members on active duty who functioned as liaisons with those soldiers looking to get out of the service. Through NOSCAM, VVAW maintained similar connections with GI dissidents in Germany and North Africa.⁹⁶

Interest in connecting with those struggling abroad was not confined to the GI movement. In August 1971, VVAW national coordinator Joe Urgo became the first Vietnam veteran to visit Hanoi. There as part of a three-person antiwar delegation, he convened with North Vietnamese Prime Minister, Pham Van Dong, visited the Museum of the Revolution, and learned of the country's rich history of resistance. The experience had a profound impact on the young veteran who reported on his travels in the October issue of *1st Casualty*:

For those who don't realize how totally we were betrayed [by our leaders in government] I ask you to take a trip to Hanoi and see for yourself what I state here; that for 10-15 years we've been fighting a people whose history is 10 times older than ours and who have thrown off every empire of that tried to enslave them — Japanese, Chinese, French, or American.⁹⁷

A little over a year later, in December 1972, Barry Romo was selected to participate in a similar expedition to North Vietnam with folk singer Joan Baez, Columbia international law professor Telford Taylor, and the Reverend Michael Alan, assistant dean of theology at Yale University. Three days after their arrival, on December 17, Nixon launched Operation Linebacker — a series of concentrated B-52 air strikes on Hanoi and Haiphong to cow the North Vietnamese into accepting American terms for peace. Thousands of people died in the “Christmas bombing,” many of them civilians.⁹⁸ While U.S. fighter pilots wreaked havoc from above, the four visitors met with North Vietnamese officials to distribute more than five hundred Christmas cards and care packages to American prisoners of war in Hanoi. Much like with Urgo, the visit left a powerful impression on Romo, who took pleasure in embarrassing his government by

⁹⁶ Thorn, interview with author, December 3, 2013.

⁹⁷ Joe Urgo, “Trip to Hanoi,” *1st Casualty*, October 1971, 5.

⁹⁸ Wells, *War Within*, 558-559.

fraternizing publicly with the enemy. “Going to Vietnam, breaking the embargo, fucking tweaking Richard Nixon’s nose, J. Edgar Hoover’s nose, and the CIA’s nose, had all of its own value,” he later said.⁹⁹

Back on the home front, the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973, which formally ended the war, prompted a change in strategy for VVAW. With U.S. support for the South Vietnamese regime decreasing steadily, members renewed their advocacy for improved veterans’ rights and became active in the discharge upgrade movement. By 1973, roughly 5.7 percent of Vietnam-era veterans had received other-than-honorable discharges from the military. A disproportionate percentage of these recipients were minorities and veterans with less than high school educations. Discharge types broke down into five categories: honorable, general, undesirable, bad conduct, and dishonorable. As per military policy, all discharge papers included “separation codes” detailing the reasons for a soldier’s release. Unfavorable codes ranged from charges of disloyalty and subversion to desertion, drug abuse, “inadequate personality,” and “homosexual tendencies.”¹⁰⁰ Theoretically, these codes were meant to stay confidential. But until 1973 interested parties could find reproductions in published military regulations or in the manuals of such prominent organizations as the Red Cross and the American Servicemen’s Union.¹⁰¹ The availability of separation codes often had an injurious effect on veterans’ post-service lives, informing everything from the type of coverage they were eligible to receive from the VA to the likelihood of them finding employment. With copies of the separation codes on file, large corporations commonly reviewed veterans’ discharge papers and screened out those with “unfavorable” reviews. The consequences of such practices were dire. Observed one agency

⁹⁹ Romo, interview with author, November 25, 2013.

¹⁰⁰ Vietnam Era Veterans’ National Resource Project, “Backgrounds: Other-Than-Honorable Discharges: Problems and Prospects for Change,” n.d. (c. 1974), 1, 3-4, Box 8, Folder 18, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, B/I-4.

sympathetic to returning vets: “The combination of these penalties consigns many veterans to a hopeless cycle of joblessness or chronic underemployment, drug addiction, chronic illness, poverty, and/or crimes and imprisonment.”¹⁰²

The government’s cumbersome discharge review process complicated the matter further. Veterans with less-than-honorable discharges that did not result from court-martial were given the opportunity to seek relief from the Discharge Review Board of their branch of service. The pace with which the review boards worked, however, rendered it a laborious procedure fraught with endless amounts of paperwork and bureaucratic logistics. As one VVAWer complained, “The government, remaining consistent with the military, has put together a program of ‘upgrading boards’ and an endless bureaucracy of red tape to even reach the board. For the military review boards to hear the cases of less-than-honorable discharges from the Vietnam era alone would take 300 years!!”¹⁰³ Knowledge of how the review process worked remained just as opaque. Most veterans depended on the VA for assistance which, in far too many cases, did little more than provide the two-page application form necessary to get the process started. As result, a great number of veterans declined the request for legal counsel and a personal appearance before the Boards — actions that generally enhanced the likelihood of a favorable upgrade. Even in cases where such benefits were understood, veterans of color and poor whites, those most often saddled with less-than-honorable discharges, remained at a disadvantage since few could afford the costs of traveling to Arlington, Virginia, where the hearings were held.¹⁰⁴ Consequently, the success rate among applicants proved quite low. Between 1967 and 1973, over 36,000 veterans

¹⁰² Vietnam Era Veterans’ National Resource Project, “Backgrounds,” 10-13; American Veterans Committee, Inc., “Facts on Other-Than Honorable-Discharges and What Can Be Done About Them,” 1973, 4, Box 8, Folder 19, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹⁰³ “Discharges,” n.d. (c. 1974), VVAW Papers, Box 8, Folder 19, WSHS.

¹⁰⁴ American Veterans Committee, “Facts on Other-Than-Honorable Discharges,” 6-8; Vietnam Era Veterans’ National Resource Project, “Backgrounds,” 13-15.

in the Army, Navy, and Air Force had applied to upgrade their subject discharge. Of which, an estimated 23 percent were approved.¹⁰⁵

To generate better success rates, and tackle the related issues of unemployment and crime, an evolving network of discharge upgrade clinics emerged in mid-1973. Most of the projects were initiated and staffed by Vietnam-era veterans and their antiwar allies as a grassroots rebuttal to the bureaucratic inefficiencies of traditional service groups and charter veterans' agencies like the VA and American Legion.¹⁰⁶ VVAW's participation in the movement came about through a national directive. But as usual, the structure and organizing patterns of each clinic varied from one chapter to the next. Out west, veterans in the Denver area teamed up with the Rocky Mountain Military Project, a Colorado-based civilian group, to form the Rocky Mountain Discharge Upgrading Project. Members attended training sessions and started evening rap groups for GIs and veterans to help with the upgrading procedures and any other points of concern.¹⁰⁷ The Dayton chapter took an alternative approach and used Gary Staiger's position as a counselor for the city's Vietnam Veterans Outreach Program to connect with the less-than-honorably discharged and educate them about their rights. It later experimented with teams of two or three counselors visiting veterans at home.¹⁰⁸

The need for a wide-ranging local discharge upgrade program energized VVAW's base. As members in Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis, and San Francisco formed their own clinics, chapters in less obvious antiwar cities like Buffalo, Indianapolis, and Columbus, Ohio, followed their example. In California's Bay Area a few even explored the possibilities of setting

¹⁰⁵ Discharge Review Board statistics for the Air Force, Army, and Navy, 1967-1973, Box 8, Folder 19, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹⁰⁶ Vietnam Era Veterans' National Resource Project, "Backgrounds," 16-17.

¹⁰⁷ Colorado-Utah-Wyoming Regional VVAW/WSO, "Hoa Binh Newsletter #1," January 1974, Box 2, Folder 23, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹⁰⁸ Gary J. Staiger to VVAW/WSO [National Office], September 17, 1973, Box 8, Folder 8; MOINKVVAWPA [*sic*] Region, "Round Robin Report," Buffalo National Steering Committee Meeting, August 1974, 1, Box 2, Folder 34, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

up a program in Soledad Prison to reach incarcerated vets.¹⁰⁹ Because poor and minority soldiers were more likely to receive other-than-honorable discharges, VVAW made a point of setting up discharge upgrade storefronts in black, Chicano, and working-class communities. The goal of each clinic was to be as anti-hierarchical as possible. Much like the rap groups, the discharge upgrading projects sought to “vitate the conventional counselor/client roles cultivated by service organizations.”¹¹⁰ Coordinators were likewise urged to create an open, compassionate environment where veterans could come in, fill out their paperwork, and talk about their problems, Barry Romo explained. “It didn’t matter if you wanted get your discharge upgraded because you had been an antiracist black person or you were a guy who wants to get back in the military because he can’t make it on the outside. People wouldn’t judge.”¹¹¹

To navigate the legal process, VVAWers relied on progressive-minded lawyers to assist in examining veterans’ military records and assemble the legal briefs for each case. In Maryland, members organized their discharge upgrade clinic with the help of Highway 13, an antiwar GI group funded by the Military Law Project. Working around Fort Meade Army Base, located just outside of Baltimore, they published a joint GI-veteran newspaper, offered counseling and legal referrals to active-duty soldiers, and worked with Vietnam vets to expand their discharge upgrade caseload.¹¹² Over on the West Coast, the San Francisco chapter recruited a small group of sympathetic law students in the summer of 1974 to write the legal briefs, organize paperwork, and staff the offices. Discharge upgrading could be tedious work, making the acquisition of such assistance vital to the program’s success. “We have learned that discharge upgrading is a very

¹⁰⁹ Staiger to VVAW/WSO [National Office]; Michael McCain, “VVAW/WSO Chapter Report,” [c. November] 1973, 3, Box 3, Folder 12, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹¹⁰ “The Discharge Upgrade Project,” program proposal, April 25, 1973, 9, Box 8, Folder 22, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹¹¹ Romo, interview with author, November 25, 2013.

¹¹² VVAW/WSO Maryland-Virginia-D.C. Region, “Report to National Steering Committee,” December 1973, 1, Box 3, Folder 2; Terry Selzer to VVAW/WSO National Collective, October 25, 1973, Box 3, Folder 2, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

long term process,” the San Francisco chapter conceded. “[I]t often has taken the year we have been working just to get completed appeal[s] to our lawyer in Washington.”¹¹³ To aid in this regard, the East Bay chapter in Oakland wrote a discharge upgrading manual for chapters to consult. Its contents provided, among other things, a sample draft brief, an introduction to military counseling and military law, and a copy of a successful funding proposal used by San Francisco to start its discharge upgrading project in 1973.¹¹⁴

As thorough as the East Bay’s manual was, in the end there was only so much an individual chapter could do. Without the necessary assistance and funding, the vast majority of VVAW’s discharge upgrade programs fell out of service between 1974 and 1975. With over 600,000 “bad paper” discharges from the Vietnam era alone, there was no way for the organization to see each case through from beginning to end, even with all the other grassroots services laboring in support of the initiative.¹¹⁵ Part of the problem was internal. Chapters without a determined set of members or access to legal counsel gradually abandoned the project citing inconsistent leadership, poor communication, and the difficulty of obtaining records from the government. All complained of having overburdened caseloads. Coordinators also expressed troubles with the applicants themselves. Summing up the status of discharge upgrading projects in Ohio and Indiana for the August 1974 national steering committee meeting in Buffalo, regional coordinator Jerry Kosanovic lamented that most “veterans seeking the status change...fail to show up at the scheduled clinic time, or tend to drop out once their immediate need is fulfilled (e.g. getting a job, etc.).”¹¹⁶

¹¹³ “DUP Summer Project,” *Bad Paper News* [published by the San Francisco chapter], July 1974, 1, Box 2, Folder 21, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹¹⁴ *Discharge Upgrade Project Manual*, n.d. (c. July 1974), Box 8, Folder 22, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹¹⁵ Bill Davis to Jeffrey R. Brown, April 4, 1976, Box 8, Folder 23 VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹¹⁶ MOINKWVAWPA Region, “Round Robin Report,” 1; MOINKWVAWPA Region, regional meeting minutes, July 27-28, 1974, Athens, Ohio, 1, 4; Box 2, Folder 34; VVAW/WSO San Jose Chapter, October/November Newsletter, n.d. (1974), Box 2, Folder 21, VVAW Papers, SHWS, Madison.

VVAWers, to their credit, however, never viewed the discharge upgrade program as the only solution to the problems associated with other-than-honorable discharges. For most, it was a temporary fix designed to “bring relief to a limited number of veterans” while the organization pursued its “long-term objective” of “a single classification discharge system, retroactively upgrading all discharges to honorable.”¹¹⁷ The push for a single-type discharge went further than the upgrading program in that it struck at the very core of the military’s authority: the abolition of the punitive discharge. “Without the threat of a lifetime of unemployment, no medical care, no education, etc...the military could not command the loyalty and obedience to the oppressive and repressive demands it makes,” Missouri’s Toby Hollander stated.¹¹⁸ To build momentum for the cause, VVAW linked single-type discharge with the broader issue of “universal unconditional amnesty.” Defining its aim as “amnesty for all war resisters,” VVAWers on the West Coast joined the Campaign for Amnesty, headquartered in San Francisco, to demand an official pardon for all those “who have been punished one way or another for their opposition to the Indochina War.”¹¹⁹ The call for amnesty, though not solely related to GIs and veterans (it also reached out to draft resisters), became part of the organization’s wider anti-imperialist agenda that began to harden in the mid-1970s. In framing the issue in such terms, the national office sought to recast less-than-honorably discharged veterans and dissident GIs as links in a worthy history of class struggle that “should be brought forward in our daily work and encouraged.” To this end,

¹¹⁷ “The Discharge Upgrade Project,” 7.

¹¹⁸ Toby Hollander, “GI Organizing and Admin Discharges,” n.d. (1973-1974), 1, Box 8, Folder 42, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹¹⁹ “Campaign for Amnesty,” pamphlet, n.d., 1, Box 2, Folder 21; “Amnesty For All War Resisters,” pamphlet, n.d., 1, Box 2, Folder 21, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

education around the discharge system and promotion of unconditional amnesty were deemed critical to exposing “[t]he military as a primary tool of imperialism both at home and abroad.”¹²⁰

Nixon’s withdrawal of U.S. troops from Southeast Asia prompted VVAWers to ponder the question of how best to keep their organization relevant. Its foray into the struggle for racial justice was one solution. By the summer of 1971, members had started to interrogate the war’s systemic causes, making injustices at home appear intimately connected to the war in Vietnam. “It is apparent to us that while this blatant genocide is being carried out against the people of Indochina, a more subtle but no less effective genocide is being carried out daily here in the belly of the beast,” wrote Al Hubbard. “Dictatorships throughout the world, increasing arrests and persecution of political prisoners, censorship of the mass media, governments that are not responsive to the people” — they were all bound together, the veterans concluded, all part and parcel of the same imperialist dynamic.¹²¹ Operation Cairo, Operation County Fair, the various political prisoner campaigns: these projects defined VVAW in its post-Dewey Canyon III period and breathed new life into its membership. The escalation in GI activism paralleled this development. What began in 1970-1971 blossomed in the proceeding years into a kaleidoscope of antiwar protest related to military counseling, discharge upgrading, and the universal amnesty for all war resisters.

Disparate as some of these projects were, they each embodied a shared localist ethos predicated on the conviction that centralized structures of power proved inadequate at meeting the needs of those on the ground. That much of VVAW’s community activism in this period

¹²⁰ *GIPA News & Discussion Bulletin*, no. 23 (September 1974), 43, Box 8, Folder 42; VVAW/WSO National Office, “Building the Anti-Imperialist GI Movement: Statement and Proposal,” prepared for the National GI Conference, Chicago, October 11-14, 1974, 2, Box 8, Folder 42, VVAW, WSHS.

¹²¹ Al Hubbard, untitled handwritten speech, n.d. (1971), Box 9; Folder 46, VVAW Papers, WSHS; Hubbard, “Viable V.V.A.W.,” 1.

materialized against the backdrop of an ever-intensifying government scheme to undermine the organization only further eroded members' faith in federal authority. "The thing that taught us a lot of lessons was the state," Bill Branson said. "They taught us a lot about who the enemy was."¹²² The escalation in state-sanctioned subversion led by the FBI had a harmful affect on VVAW. Yet it did not deliver an immediate knock out punch. Despite all the harassment, VVAWers on the whole remained remarkably resilient at a time when most sixties groups had either folded or were on the brink of doing so. Of course, in the end, decline did come to the organization, with the FBI playing substantial role. But it was not the only factor. VVAWers themselves played a part in their own undoing. A decision to loosen the group's membership restrictions, combined with its already fierce affinity for decentralization, rendered the organization vulnerable to sectarian troubles. And so as the middle of the decade approached, VVAW soon found itself under siege both from within and without.

¹²² Branson, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 351,

CHAPTER FIVE

From Revolution to Reform

VVAW did not die after the initialing of the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973. Some members left once it appeared the war was ending. But many others stayed on, and new ones joined as coordinators in the national office worked to build VVAW into a permanent anti-imperialist movement. As the middle of the decade approached, however, the organization entered a period of instability. Continued conflict between VVAW and the government, culminating in the Gainesville Eight trial, left it bruised and depleted. Burnout and sectarian politics also took a toll as the liabilities associated with VVAW's fierce decentralism became less forgiving. As the veterans struggled to define their role in a post-Vietnam War world, the organization lost steam and countless chapters folded. And yet somehow VVAW never closed its doors. Even in the face of tremendous opposition, clusters of members inside and outside of the national office struggled to keep what remnants remained alive through to the 1980s. The Agent Orange campaign launched in the late seventies did much to help in this regard, as did organized protests against U.S. support of the Nicaraguan contras and Salvadoran death squads in the eighties. Culture, too, remained a point of interest for Vietnam vets as former VVAWers took the lead in ushering forth a literary renaissance of veteran poetry and prose. Indeed, despite the noxious effects of vanguardism, VVAW weathered the ultra-left storm, finding new life in its return to what historian Michael Foley calls a "front porch politics."¹

By the time of the Paris Peace agreement VVAW had undergone yet another structural realignment. At a national steering committee meeting in Houston, in April 1972, Al Hubbard

¹ Foley, *Front Porch Politics*, 5-11.

and Joe Urgo, the two longest serving national officers in New York, abstained from reelection ushering forth a new era in VVAW leadership, less tempered and more regionally diverse than previous cohorts. Of the six men elected to the national coordinator position, three hailed from California and two came from the South.² In a move to further disassociate the organization from its East Coast roots, VVAW's staff voted in the summer of 1972 to move the national office from New York City to Chicago. There "was a feeling that the national office was unresponsive to the organization's needs," explained Barry Romo, one of the newly elected national coordinators. "The organization had now grown beyond the initial people that had organized it. It went beyond New York."³ The move was welcomed most by those who criticized the national office for being out of touch with the rest of the country. Such sentiments grew exponentially in the aftermath of Dewey Canyon III. "The feeling that I got was that here we had these guys in New York that were telling us what to do and they didn't know shit, so we had to do it for ourselves," national coordinator Mike McCain said.⁴

The impulse toward greater decentralization, however, stood at odds with the leadership's desire to build VVAW into a permanent organization on the Left. To ensure its durability, the national office demanded greater discipline, order, and communication; it sought a tightly run internal structure that could be sustained during good times and bad. For a group of more regimented activists this might have worked. But for VVAW, there were limits to what its membership would consent to. While the national staff complained about the organization's "lack of communication and abdication of responsibility at all levels," chapter coordinators

² Letter to VVAW members summarizing highlights from the national steering committee meeting in Houston, April 7-11, 1972, Box 1, Folder 8; "Current National Coordinators," n.d. (1972), Box 1, Folder 8, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

³ Romo, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 304; "Notes on Steering Committee Meeting — Wisconsin July 1972," Box 1, Folder 9, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁴ Michael McCain, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 304-305.

remained obstinate, derogatorily calling national officers “bureaucrats” and refusing requests to submit regional reports.⁵ Matters were further complicated by the group’s inconsistent membership. John Lindquist referred to VVAW as a “flow-through organization”: “Vets come in, have a good time, do some demos, find it too political, and leave; or vets come in to do their thing and leave.”⁶ To compensate for these inconsistencies some chapters explored the possibility of admitting women as full members in the fall of 1972. Colorado’s Brian Adams first floated the idea at a national steering committee meeting in Palo Alto, California. In addition to granting women equal status, Adams’s motion proposed the creation of an “organization of Winter Soldiers...that would be open to all people who are in spirit and in action truly consistent with the goals that we are struggling for.”⁷ Coordinators went back to their regions to discuss the proposal with their constituents where it proved a contentious issue. Those in favor of the “Winter Soldier Organization” (WSO) concept saw it as a way of shaping VVAW into a genuine anti-imperialist umbrella group by formally awarding non-veterans (women and men) the right to vote and fill leadership positions. Those opposed worried the change would dilute VVAW’s credibility and render it ineffectual.⁸

VVAW officially adopted the WSO proposal in April 1973 at a meeting in Placitas, New Mexico and renamed itself “Vietnam Veterans Against the War/Winter Soldier Organization.” The final pronouncement, voted on by the national steering committee, left bitter feelings in those chapters resistant to the transformation. Lindquist, for one, had to “force” himself to write

⁵ Unsigned letter of complaint to the national office, n.d. (c. fall 1972), 1, 6, Box 1, Folder 9; NC [Ed Damato] to Jack [no last name given], New England Regional Coordinator, September 13, 1973, 2, Box 2, Folder 28, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁶ Lindquist, interview, *Winter Soldier*, 273.

⁷ Brian Adams, “Thoughts on the Future of VVAW,” in “Committee on VVAW Internal Problems and Politics, NSC Meeting, Palo Alto, California, September 29-October 2, 1972,” 6, Box 1, Folder 10, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁸ Dayton VVAW/WSO, Newsletter #15, May 9, 1973, 1, Box 5, Folder 6, VVAW Papers, WSHS; David Cline, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 365.

or say “VVAW/WSO” in communication with others. Long Beach vets in California, a state overwhelming favorable to the Winter Soldier idea, feuded with the national office over the name change, as well as the development of an outwardly anti-imperialist agenda. Washington-Alaska regional coordinator Tom Davis, speaking from a similar perspective, felt it would be more beneficial for VVAW to “dissolve itself” rather than be reduced to “just another left sect.”⁹ Fears that VVAW would now become a fulcrum for ultra-left radicals were not unwarranted. With the vast majority of sixties groups languishing moribund or defunct, VVAW stood virtually peerless in 1972-1973 as the most viable vehicle for securing revolutionary change. Aware of this, wandering radicals formerly linked to the Weather Underground and Prairie Fire took advantage of VVAW/WSO’s open membership and made the organization their home.

The drift toward political sectarianism would have a debilitating affect on the organization, causing much personal and professional strife. In the interim, however, women took full advantage of their newfound status under the WSO banner, assuming important leadership positions in the national and regional offices. Such developments went a long way in augmenting the group’s complex culture of chauvinism. Sexism, after all, manifested itself in different ways in VVAW. A great many women were first introduced to the organization as the girlfriends and wives of veterans, and like other movement women grew discontented with their second-class status. “I have been trying my damnest to work with VVAW only to be given shit work, and ignored,” one woman complained. “We are not just the staff shit-workers...we are a creative and very necessary part of the VVAW family,” affirmed another.¹⁰ Nurses, by contrast,

⁹ Lindquist and Jeanne Friedman, interviews, *Winter Soldiers*, 365, 366; Bob Hood and Bob Traller to the North California chapters, May 1973, 1, Box 1, Folder 12; Tom Davis, open letter to all VVAW/WSO chapters, December 17, 1973, Box 1, Folder 13, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹⁰ Liz [Derr] to Annie [Bailey], June 27, [1973], Box 5, Folder 24; Wisconsin Region, VVAW Newsletter, November 1972, 1, Box 23, Folder 9, VVAW Papers, WSHS. By the mid-1960s such feelings were common among white women in the New Left and civil rights movement. Despite utilizing the language of equality and radical

encountered their own unique set of barriers when they approached the group. The story of Lynda Van Devanter is familiar and telling. An Army nurse sent to Vietnam in 1968, she was stationed at the 71st Evac Hospital at Pleiku and witnessed daily the savagery of combat. She returned home in 1970 a changed person, haunted by memories of the ER. Like other veterans, she struggled with depression and alcoholism and reflected critically on the war.¹¹ Tired of her private suffering, she attended a VVAW planning meeting in preparation for a demonstration in Washington, D.C. There she was informed by an apologetic VVAWer that she could not participate in the scheduled march. When she asked why, he responded: “Nixon and the network news reporters might think we’re swelling the ranks with nonvets.” Van Devanter protested, reciting her credentials in vain. Her experiences, valid as they were, were unable make up for the fact that she did not look like a traditional vet.¹²

As troubling as these realities were, a number of women stuck with the organization and were able to make meaningful contributions to VVAW and its development. Ann Hirschman first encountered VVAW in mid-1968 while working with the Medical Committee on Human Rights. A registered nurse, she volunteered in the New York headquarters “being of use to people in medical ways and just as someone to talk to who wasn’t a vet.”¹³ Nancy Miller Saunders, part of the documentary film crew present at Operation RAW and the Winter Soldier Investigation, became a fixture in VVAW chapters across the South, attending demonstrations and teaching veterans proper guerrilla theater techniques.¹⁴ In Milwaukee, Annie Bailey helped run the Wisconsin-Minnesota region with her companion, John Lindquist. Officially designated

democracy, the male-dominated leadership of groups like SDS and SNCC largely dismissed concerns of women’s liberation as “personal” and “apolitical.” See Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 25-50; Evans, *Personal Politics*, 156-192.

¹¹ Lynda Van Devanter, *Home Before Morning: The Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983; reprinted in 2001), 95-107, 212-223, 227-228.

¹² *Ibid.*, 230-231.

¹³ Ann Hirschman, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 203.

¹⁴ Saunders, *Combat by Trial*, 175,

the regional secretary, she worked long hours to build the close-knit atmosphere that came to define the Milwaukee branch. Part of her efforts included churning out informative newsletters (complete with baked goods recipes), promoting partnerships with local co-ops, and planning “family nights” to assist veterans and their partners with the reintegration process.¹⁵ A firm opponent of sexism, she labored to “create a strong, positive pro-women atmosphere” in the regional headquarters.¹⁶ Several others followed these examples and accepted leadership positions in VVAW projects related to GI outreach, drug counseling, and Operation County Fair.¹⁷ “We couldn’t have done many of the things we did, clearly, without the assistance of people who were not veterans who thought this was really important to help this organization,” especially women, acknowledged Jan Barry.¹⁸

The one woman who perhaps did more than all others to build VVAW into a mass movement also happened to be its unlikeliest, at least in terms of her style and temperament. Madelyn Moore, the middle-aged mother of VVAW vice-president Scott Moore, had been an activist in her own right and worked on the Fifth Avenue Peace Parade Committee in New York City before joining VVAW as its full-time office organizer in late 1969. Under her influence the newly revived group flourished. Gifted with a disciplined work ethic, she standardized the mailing lists, coordinated fundraising drives, and brought a level of professionalism to the national office that did much to win over new members.¹⁹ “As best I could tell that remarkable

¹⁵ Bailey, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 273; Wisconsin Region, VVAW Newsletter, January 1972, 5, Box 23, Folder 9; Wisconsin Region, VVAW Newsletter, April 1972, 1, Box 23, Folder 9; Milwaukee VVAW/WSO Newsletter, September 1973, 2, Box 23, Folder 10; “Food Buying Cooperative,” n.d., Box 23, Folder 34, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹⁶ Wisconsin Region, VVAW Newsletter, November [1972], 1.

¹⁷ The number of women activists who contributed to VVAW over its history are too numerous to count. Among those who deserve greater consideration than I can provide here are Linda Alband, Annie Luginbill, Jeanne Friedman, Linda Regnier, Jill Johnston, and Marla Watson.

¹⁸ Barry, interview with author, October 30, 2013.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*; Jim Davis, “Madelyn Moore: Rest In Peace,” *The Veteran* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2008), 41.

woman was the guiding force who kept the veterans on track,” concluded Saunders.²⁰ Following the success of Dewey Canyon III, her quiet leadership held “things under control” at the national level until her departure in the fall of 1971. Affectionately referred to as “the Mother of Vietnam Veterans Against the War,” Moore’s youthful demeanor belied her age. “She didn’t seem that old at the time I remember her, and her spirit and goodwill made her seem that much younger,” VVAWer Jim Davis recalled. Nor did her departure from the organization she helped build signal the end of her influence. Forty years later, at a VVAW reunion in Chicago, Al Hubbard referred lovingly to Moore as “my inspiration” and “the grandest lady I’ve ever known.”²¹

Moore’s contributions, like most female advocates, were largely supportive. But as the number of women attached to the organization swelled, so too did demands for greater equality between the sexes. To address the problem of sexism in VVAW, women began reaching out to one another to mobilize a network of support in advance of the WSO decision. The Milwaukee chapter, under Bailey’s stewardship, helped signal the call with the article, “Women in VVAW Unite,” printed in its November 1972 newsletter. Five months later, a national women’s mailing list was compiled and an exclusive bulletin sent out “to let women around the country know what their sisters are doing.” Along with providing updates, the newsletter offered suggested readings and commentary on the pending Winter Soldier proposal.²² Later that year two women-only meetings were organized “for the purposes of discussing problems with chauvinism, relating to veterans, [and] women’s roles” in VVAW.²³ They also experimented with consciousness-raising. The national “woman’s caucus,” formed in January 1973, gave women the opportunity to gather

²⁰ Saunders, *Combat by Trial*, 97.

²¹ Davis, “Madelyn Moore,” 41; Al Hubbard, “Honor to Attend the VVAW 40th Anniversary,” *The Veteran* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2007), 17. Courtesy Al Hubbard.

²² Wisconsin Region, VVAW Newsletter, November [1972], 1; Wisconsin Region, VVAW Newsletter, March [1973], 4, Box 23, Folder 9, VVAW, WSHS; Women’s national newsletter, March, 30, [1973], 1-2, in author’s possession.

²³ “Women Unite and Be at the Women’s National Meetings!!,” Alabama-Mississippi-Tennessee regional report, n.d. (c. May 1973), 1, Box 1, Folder 12, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

and “talk about our problems & not be intimidated or dominated.”²⁴ The project paralleled efforts already underway in local communities. Chapters in Alabama, Buffalo, New York City, San Francisco, Detroit, and Texas each launched their own women’s groups, the latter calling theirs “The Turn of the Screwed.”²⁵ At these meetings, participants “discussed problems at home, family needs, city needs, world needs, and [the] developing co-op efforts” in different cities.²⁶

Men, for their part, had made strides to combat sexism and reassess their treatment of women in the pre-WSO era. Even though women were unable to join as full members until April 1973, veterans took pride in VVAW’s refusal to establish a woman’s auxiliary, as the more traditional American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars had done. Chapters in California, benefiting from this open practice, actively tackled issues of chauvinism in workshops and study groups. Reading lists featuring popular feminist texts like Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectics of Sex*, and the anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful* were further compiled to sharpen political discourse.²⁷ Midwestern chapters approached the issue with a similar vitality. In November 1972, Ohio’s Gary Staiger composed a critical essay on the ubiquitous practice of brothel hopping on R&R retreats. “Taking a prostitute to bed, without any thought given as to who she is, why she is, or of her as a human being, is just what the military is trying to teach men,” he argued. “After all, if you don’t care who you screw, then you won’t care

²⁴ Unknown author to Annie [Bailey], February 22, 1973, Box 5, Folder 24; “Woman’s Caucus,” January 1973, Box 23, Folder 12, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

²⁵ Lifton, *Home From the War*, 260-261; Women’s national newsletter, 1; Alabama-Mississippi Region, Newsletter #18, n.d. (c. summer 1971), 1, Box 2, Folder 20; “Ourselves,” Bay Area women’s group, n.d. (c. early 1973), Box 2, Folder 21; New York-Northern New Jersey Region, Round Robin Report, December 1973, 1, Box 1, Folder 13, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

²⁶ Detroit VVAW Newsletter, April 1972, 5, Box 4, Folder 9, VVAW, WSHS.

²⁷ Minutes for the California VVAW Regional Conference, Sacramento, California, November 24-26, 1972, 5-6, Box 2, Folder 24, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

who you shoot.”²⁸ The following year two Milwaukee veterans, John Lindquist and Buzz Noyes, entered the “Mr. Man” competition “as a consciousness-raising experience.”²⁹ The event was sponsored by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Campus Women’s Center. Like the Miss American Pageant it parodied, participants paraded down a runway wearing pink satin sashes as they competed in the bathing suit, formal wear, and talent competitions. “As each contestant approached the runway, his age, weight, height and measurements were announced, to great applause,” noted an observer. At the end of the show, the scruffy-looking Lindquist walked away with top honors: \$25 in cash, a quarter barrel of beer, and the prestige of being named Mr. Man.³⁰

Coincidentally, even as VVAWers gravitated toward feminism, they similarly could not ignore the groundswell of gay liberation. As early as the fall of 1971, some members had taken vocal stands in opposition to anti-gay attitudes in the military. “Each year about 2,000 brothers and sisters have been less than honorably discharged from service solely because of their homosexuality. This is an atrocity in itself,” wrote New York’s Vince Muscari, an openly gay Vietnam veteran. As a measure of assistance, Muscari urged those veterans less than honorably discharged because of their sexuality to contact him personally or meet with “the nearest Gay Liberation group in your area.”³¹ Like other sixties activists, though, many VVAWers struggled with homophobia. The more radical VVAW/WSO became the more its leadership questioned the revolutionary validity of gay liberation in the struggle against imperialism. When faced with the question in December 1973, the national steering committee determined that “we do not feel that

²⁸ Gary Staiger, “Sexism in the Military,” Ohio-Indiana-Kentucky Region, Newsletter, November 15, 1972, 6, Box 2, Folder 34, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

²⁹ Wisconsin Region, VVAW Newsletter, March 1973, 4.

³⁰ Barbara Abel, “There He Goes,” *Milwaukee Journal*, April 13, 1973; “First Annual Mr. Man Beauty Pageant, Sponsored by the UWM Campus Women’s Center,” event program, n.d. (April 1973), Box 23, Folder 8, VVAW Papers, SHWS, Madison.

³¹ Vince [Muscari], “Cut Off Da Ear or You’re a Queer,” *1st Casualty*, October 1971, 2.

discussion and struggle around homosexual oppression is a priority or should be, and that we should not get bogged down in rapping about sex.”³² Given the group’s struggles with chauvinism, homophobia proved a tough nut to crack. Fortunately, the national office did not speak for all chapters. Members in the Maryland-Virginia-D.C. region, for instance, “resolved to fight” all forms of sexism that infringe on the “rights of men and women, heterosexuals, lesbians, and homosexuals to grow free from predesigned sex roles.” Likewise, activists in the Boulder, Colorado, chapter explored the possibility of joining with local gay rights activists to aid in reversing bad discharges given to homosexuals.³³

The nuances of VVAW’s attitudes toward sexism and gay rights meant little to those in the federal government convinced of the organization’s alleged violent intentions. In Florida, as debates over the Winter Solider Organized swirled, the Gainesville Eight prepared their defense against charges of plotting an assault on the 1972 Republican National Convention with automatic weapons, crossbows, and slingshots. The trial commenced on July 31, 1973 and continued throughout the month of August. At the time, the two issues — WSO and the Gainesville Eight — could not have appeared more separate. But as the trial unfolded, the proceedings offered the newly minted VVAW/WSO a cautionary look into the inherent dangers of relaxing membership qualifications for an already overly decentralized organization.

Proof of the supposed conspiracy relied heavily on the testimony of five paid informants and an undercover police officer. Knowledge that the government had used subversive practices to undermine VVAW did not surprise the eight defendants. Such tactics, they argued, were

³² “Sexism Workshop,” National Steering Committee Meeting, Yellow Springs, Ohio, 16.

³³ Maryland-Virginia-D.C. Region, “Report to National Steering Committee,” December 1973, 2, Box 1, Folder 13; “Minutes to Regional Meeting,” Colorado Springs, Colorado, December 10, 1973, 1, Box 2, Folder 23, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

indicative of the prosecution's true intentions. "This is a government warning that anyone who protests too loudly or too effectively could meet the same fate," they said in a joint statement.³⁴ As evidence of the government's nefarious aims, the defendants cited the regular use of wire tapping, informants, and *agents provocateurs* "to intimidate and discredit the anti-war movement and those who choose to dissent in this country."³⁵ Yet when the prosecution revealed that three of the five informants were VVAW state coordinators in the South, and another the roommate of Gainesville Eight defendant Alton Foss, feelings of betrayal swept through the courtroom. "It blew me away," said Scott Camil, whose best friend, Emerson Poe, turned out to be an FBI informant.³⁶ The accused might have been rendered even more despondent had the prosecution not acted so hastily in its zest for convictions. Aside from a few "gaudy tales" unrelated to the indictments, the most the government unearthed from its informers in the way of physical evidence was "55 boxes of wrist rocket slingshots confiscated from the Wang Dang Doodle hippie store and a V.V.A.W. pre-convention newsletter mentioning sling shots." Any hope of persuading the jury with such paltry evidence foundered when an FBI ballistics test demonstrated that projectiles launched from the slingshots failed to pierce even the skin of a rabbit.³⁷ In its closing argument the prosecution continued to bungle its case, confusing the testimony of different witnesses and adding new details never presented from the witness stand.³⁸

³⁴ "Nixon Administration Attempts to Destroy VVAW," n.d. (c. late 1972), 1, Box 22, Folder 28, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

³⁶ John Kifner, "Arguments End in Gainesville 8 Trial," *New York Times*, August 31, 1973; Prados, *Hidden History*, 290-291; Scott Camil, "Undercover Agents' War on Vietnam Veterans," in Bud Schultz and Ruth Schultz, eds., *It Did Happen Here: Recollections of Political Repression in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 328.

³⁷ John Kifner, "For the U.S., It's the Gainesville 0," *New York Times*, September 2, 1973; Prados, *Hidden History*, 291, 292.

³⁸ Kifner, "Arguments End."

The jury deliberated for less than four hours before announcing its verdict of not guilty on all counts. As one juror stated when interviewed, “They had nothing on those boys.”³⁹ For the moment VVAWers rejoiced. But the margin between victory and defeat was slim. Although the government failed in its endeavor to convict the eight defendants, it succeeded in disrupting VVAW at the moment it could least afford to be divided. Energy and resources that might have otherwise sustained VVAW/WSO as it made the transition to a post-Vietnam War context were instead redirected to the Gainesville Eight’s defense. All told, the trial drained \$275,000 from the organization and decimated its presence in the South.⁴⁰ Chapter activity in the once thriving region grinded to a halt. “They killed off VVAW in the southern half of the United States. They got the whole leadership and scared off a bunch of other people,” said national coordinator Pete Zastrow.⁴¹ Added Barry Romo: “They knew what they were doing. I don’t think they ever thought they were going to get a conviction.”⁴²

Outwardly VVAW/WSO stood united in proclaiming the defendants’ innocence. Privately, they warred over strategy and personality conflicts. Some of the tension stemmed from internal divisions, often regional in nature. When national coordinators retained the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights to provide legal assistance for the eight, the defendant John Kniffin balked. They “were a bunch of damn Yankees and I didn’t trust them,” he later said. “I didn’t know what their motivation was.”⁴³ Others wondered about the stability of Kniffin’s codefendant, Scott Camil. Prior to joining the antiwar movement, Camil had spent twenty months in Vietnam as a forward observer in the Marine Corps and received nine medals for his service. He first encountered VVAW at the Winter Soldier Investigation in Detroit where

³⁹ Prados, *Hidden History*, 292-293.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁴¹ Pete Zastrow, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 344.

⁴² Romo, interview with author, November 25, 2013.

⁴³ Kniffin, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 344.

he delivered some of its most chilling testimony.⁴⁴ Shortly thereafter, in early 1971, Camil assumed the position of coordinator for the Florida-Georgia-Alabama region and developed a reputation as one of the group's more charismatic figures. At the Kansas City national steering committee meeting later that year he introduced a plan to assassinate the most determined congressional hawks on Capitol Hill in order to eliminate the "governmental chain of command" and bring the war to an immediate end.⁴⁵ Those present voted down the scheme but to some of his southern comrades it seemed a logical proposal. "The plan has a simple beauty to it," Arkansas's Don Donner defended. "If the time has come to resort to violence (and I'm not so sure it hasn't) then a quick clean action is probably the best thing we can do."⁴⁶

These kinds of ideas made the national office nervous, especially in light of the federal indictments. VVAW's decentralism did not help the situation either. With no consistent safeguards to evaluate potential members, VVAW let in its share of "colorful" and controversial characters. Camil was one. Bill Lemmer another. The veteran-turned-informer had been a VVAW regional coordinator in the South and the prosecution's star witness in the Gainesville Eight trial. While his "compulsive" ego alienated most of the veterans he worked with, he managed to cultivate a small following among the region's more radical constituents with his "explosive rhetoric" and "wild exhortations to violence that burst out of him at planning sessions."⁴⁷ When two VVAWers asked about his proclivity toward violence, Lemmer replied: "I was Special Forces. I had school in weapons. My God. I know weapons. I had three years and

⁴⁴ Camil, "Undercover Agents' War on Vietnam Veterans," 319-322; "Biographical Sketches of Defendants," 1.

⁴⁵ FBI report, "Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), Steering Committee Meeting, Kansas City, Missouri, November 12, 13, 14, 1971, Internal Security — New Left," November 18, 1971, FBI File No. 100-HQ-448092: PSM Folder No. [23], Reel: 4, FOIA.

⁴⁶ Saunders, *Combat by Trial*, 227.

⁴⁷ Frank Donner, "The Confession of an FBI Informer," *Harper's*, December 1972, 56.

four months of weapons, and this is what I know.”⁴⁸ Such grandstanding raised some concerns about Lemmer’s intentions, but while the threat of violence could be a tell-tale sign of one’s status as an informer or *provocateur*, it was never a guarantee. As evidenced by the case of Camil, several legitimate members in VVAW’s southern wing were prepared “to bring down the government” through force, acknowledged Nancy Miller Saunders, or, at the very least, prepare themselves for the possibilities of self-defense.⁴⁹ This affinity for firearms and cryptic posturing worried several members, while others regarded it more benignly. “You have to understand, whenever you get two or more vets together, you’re going to have some crazy conspiracy come out,” explained Kniffin. “That kind of rhetoric went on all the time. Nobody thought too much about it.”⁵⁰

Regardless of the veterans’ varying perspectives on violence, one fact remained clear: VVAW’s decentralized apparatus made regulating its membership difficult if not impossible. And since VVAWers were generally “averse to the idea of leadership, of accepting responsibility for control of the organization,” those seeking power often acquired it with minimal resistance.⁵¹ The FBI took full advantage of this practice in the South where by early 1972 it controlled three of its five major regions. Lemmer oversaw the Arkansas-Oklahoma section. Emerson Poe, Camil’s best friend, replaced the latter as the coordinator of Alabama and Georgia. A third agent, Carl Becker, headed the Louisiana-Mississippi section, a region so thoroughly saturated with government informants that the New Orleans chapter was believed to be composed entirely of spies from separate agencies.⁵² At one point there were an estimated eleven different government agencies (federal, state, and local) inside VVAW. Said one police informant: “Darling, the spies

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

⁴⁹ Saunders, *Combat by Trial*, 257.

⁵⁰ Ramsdell, Romo, and Kniffin, interviews, *Winter Soldiers*, 337-339, 341.

⁵¹ Truscott, “Vietnam Veterans Against the War,” 20.

⁵² Camil, “Undercover Agents,” 328.

were spying on the spies that were spying on the spies.”⁵³ Outside the South, chapters were equally vulnerable. For two years in the early 1970s a military intelligence agent for the Army ran the Columbus, Ohio, chapter as its vice president. His strong work ethic and attention to detail helped, ironically, keep the chapter afloat. Similar cases of informants running chapters, selling newspapers, and planning VVAW events were found in Los Angeles, Chicago, Miami, and Washington, D.C.⁵⁴ “I can see where agents and provocateurs are able to move in and take over,” said one veteran familiar with VVAW. “They do so by default, because no one else is willing to take any responsibility.”⁵⁵

Troubles with infiltration accelerated after the adoption of WSO in April 1973. The relaxation of membership restrictions made distinguishing friend from foe increasingly complicated and attracted unwanted elements into the group. Most bizarre were revelations that by the mid-1970s various members of the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) — a ragtag group of self-styled revolutionaries made famous for kidnapping media heiress Patricia Hearst — had been affiliated with Oakland’s East Bay chapter. The tangential association between VVAW/WSO and the SLA encouraged greater FBI scrutiny in northern California, including the introduction of troubled informant, Sarah Jane Moore, who later attempted to assassinate President Gerald Ford.⁵⁶ Just as serious was the encroaching influence of the Revolutionary Union (RU), a small Maoist sect later renamed the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) in 1975 by its leader, Bob Avaikan. Interest in the ultra-left group started in the national office and spread down into local chapters as a counterpoint to the WSO’s multi-issue anti-imperialist

⁵³ Hunt, *Turning*, 149; Saunders, *Combat by Trial*, 286; Prados, *Hidden History*, 289.

⁵⁴ G. Roberts, “Former VVAW Leader Suddenly Shows Up as Boy in Blue,” *Los Angeles Star* n.d. (c. late September-early October 1972), found in the VVAW FBI Harassment file, JALC; Annie Luginbill and Davis, interviews, *Winter Soldiers*, 328-329, 330; Hunt, *Turning*, 84.

⁵⁵ Truscott, “Vietnam Veterans Against the War,” 21.

⁵⁶ David Ewing and Thorn, interviews, *Winter Soldiers*, 328, 380; Steven Schlach, “FBI Harassment Form,” May 29, 1974, and Jeanne Friedman, “FBI Harassment Form,” October 1, 1974, VVAW FBI Harassment file, JALC.

agenda. Sensing an opportunity with VVAW/WSO's amended membership qualifications, RU activists recruited figures in the national office interested in re-concentrating VVAW/WSO's attention exclusively on veterans issues as a way of absorbing Vietnam vets into the RU's broader revolutionary fold.⁵⁷

By 1974, national coordinators had quietly started to bring their objectives in line with the RU's goals. At a national steering committee meeting in December, coordinators voted to refocus VVAW/WSO's "activities on the struggles of vets and GIs." Exponents of this decision remained committed anti-imperialists, but with a strictly servicemen's agenda.⁵⁸ In response to this move, a small bloc of chapters in California's Bay Area and New York state called the Anti-Imperialist Minority Focus (AIMF) formed to stunt the RU's rising profile in VVAW/WSO and fight to retain its broad anti-imperialist focus. Those who championed the AIMF position criticized the RU for its silence on issues of sexism and race, and decried its "poor relations" with Third World liberation groups inside the United States.⁵⁹ For the next year, the two factions warred over the correct revolutionary line: remain a multi-issue anti-imperialist movement or centralize around a single ideological strategy. Several of those attracted to the latter position enjoyed its vet-centered focus. More than a few were energized by its theoretical dogma. "The RU was the one group that had the clearest revolutionary analysis and vision of American society and what needed to be done," explained longtime member Joe Uργο.⁶⁰ The desire for "discipline," too, made the RU attractive, added Barry Romo. "Making it through incredibility

⁵⁷ Ewing, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 369.

⁵⁸ VVAW/WSO Collective, untitled position paper on the 1975 VVAW/WSO split, 2-3, Box 13, Folder 10; Tom Zangrilli, Barry Romo, and Ron Schneck, untitled paper on the expulsion of AIMF chapters in California, 1975, 7, Box 13, Folder 12, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁵⁹ [Jeanne Friedman], "Struggle in VVAW/WSO," from *Seize the Time*, an underground newspaper from Santa Barbara, reprinted by the Northern California Anti-Imperialist Caucus, 1975, Box 13, Folder 12, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁶⁰ Uργο, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 371.

tough times. Seeing how the Vietnamese did it. You know, what it took for them to fight a war and make change.”⁶¹

Yet even as the organization began to fracture, pockets of VVAWers still found causes to champion. In addition to the Martin Luther King Memorial Clinic, political prisoner campaigns, and the discharge upgrade programs that occupied members during this period, prison reform offered another platform around which to unite. According to the 1970 census, there were almost 100,000 veterans in state and federal prisons. As more and more soldiers left the military with less-than-honorable discharges, the number of incarcerated Vietnam-era veterans increased. Greater levels of unemployment and alienation among vets in their post-service lives made them vulnerable to arrest. So, too, did their general contempt for authority. “After having seen what the U.S. government was doing in Southeast Asia, thousands of vets are much less likely to pay attention to the so-called ‘laws and orders’ of the same government at home,” VVAW/WSO explained.⁶² To reach out to this troubled constituency, coordinators built contacts with prison rights groups in California (United Prisoners Union), Louisiana (Veterans Incarcerated), Ohio (Ohio Prisoners Labor Union), and New Hampshire (North East Prisoners Association).⁶³ Where no such projects existed, chapters worked together to provide imprisoned veterans with relief. In anticipation of the 1973 holiday season, members from the Ohio and East Pennsylvania region put on a “People’s Concert” for residents of the Huntington, Pennsylvania, state prison. The

⁶¹ Romo, interview with author, November 25, 2013. This chapter of VVAW’s history reflected a wider trend among contemporary leftist organizations. The drift toward ultra-left politics crystalized in the late 1960s and 1970s as antiwar and antiracist radicals aligned with the goal of full and final revolution in America began to experiment more explicitly with concepts of Marxism, violence, anti-imperialism, and vanguard politics to turn their objectives into reality. For more on this subject, see the various essays in Berger, *Hidden 1970s*, as well as Dan Berger, *Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2005), and Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁶² “Vets in Prison,” *Winter Soldier*, June-July 1975, 14.

⁶³ Marla Watson to United Prisoners Union, November 10, 1973, Box 17, Folder 7; John C. Vance Jr. to Pete Zastrow, December 1, 1975, Box 17, Folder 9; Marla Watson to Ohio Prisoners Labor Union, October 1, 1973, Box 16, Folder 27; Monty Neill to Gene Mason et al., June 6, 1975, Box 16, Folder 26, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

evening consisted of six musical acts and a series of “politically relevant” discussions to strengthen the bonds among prisoners and activists.⁶⁴

The issue of prison reform dovetailed with the group’s ongoing struggles against the VA. Proper rehabilitation, the veterans argued, required education and job training. But as the government threatened additional VA cutbacks amidst a weakening 1970s economy, VVAW/WSO struck back. The spring and summer of 1974 witnessed a barrage of activity. Early in the year members in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Washington D.C., staged a synchronized takeover of three VA hospitals to demand an “END TO CUTBACKS” and an “END TO RED TAPE.”⁶⁵ Two months later, in May, the Milwaukee chapter planned a Winter Soldier Investigation into the “butcher-shop conditions” of the local Woods VA Hospital. When they arrived, seventeen participants were arrested for “unauthorized demonstration on VA grounds.”⁶⁶ Attempts to quell and discredit the veterans did not work. On July 2, approximately two hundred veterans and non-veterans marched to the national VA headquarters to demand better benefits for all returning soldiers. Twenty stormed the building to secure a meeting with its chief director. The action was part of a four-day demonstration in Washington, D.C., organized by VVAW/WSO for the Fourth of July holiday. Over 3,500 VVAW/WSO members and supporters

⁶⁴ Cincinnati, Ohio, Regional Newsletter #9, January 29, 1974, Box 2, Folder 34, VVAW Papers, WSHS; “Unity In Prison,” *Winter Soldier*, February 1974, 5. The movement for prisoners’ rights and the abolition of imprisonment became widespread in the 1960s and 1970s. For a brief history of the campaign and its origins, see Liz Samuels, “Improvising on Reality: The Roots of Prison Abolition,” in *Hidden 1970s*, 21-38.

⁶⁵ Alex P. Dopish, “Former Marines Rips VA on Drug Treatment,” *Milwaukee Journal*, n.d., found in Box 23, Folder 39; “Honor Vietnam Veterans, End the Damn VA Cutbacks, Organize to Fight,” VVAW/WSO flier, March [1974], Box 18, Folder 8, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁶⁶ “Winter Soldier Investigation May 17 Woods V.A. Hospital,” VVAW/WSO flier, May [1974], Box 23, Folder 39; “Press Statement,” May 17, [1974], Box 23, Folder 39, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

attended to demand universal amnesty, a single-type discharge for all veterans, an end to all aid to South Vietnam, and decent benefits for all vets.⁶⁷

The national office touted the July actions as a success. Behind the scenes, seasoned VVAW/WSO members appeared less impressed. After violence erupted the first evening between demonstrators and police, Lee Thorn abandoned the protest to join a Vietnam veterans' caucus on Capitol Hill composed of some former VVAW congressional allies tasked with working on new legislation for the VA.⁶⁸ For Kniffin, it was the veteran's last protest with VVAW/WSO. The RU's homogenizing influence on the organization he once loved proved too much for the former Gainesville Eight defendant. "In the early days, VVAW was such a bunch of anarchists," he warmly recalled. "We had the hard-line commie ideologues and we had the hard-line anarchist ideologues and we had people who had no ideology whatsoever. They were all getting together and having all these incredible arguments, but there was an awful lot of love in the organization. That's what was missing in D.C."⁶⁹ Danny Friedman of the Brooklyn chapter concurred. The RU "co-opted the whole thing," he lamented. "I felt really betrayed by the guys like Ed [Damato] and Joe Uργο; these were the intellectuals of the group."⁷⁰

As the RU consolidated its influence in Chicago, VVAW/WSO devolved further into discord. At a 1975 subregional conference in California, members voted to expel the pro-AIMF chapters in Oakland, San Francisco, and San Jose from VVAW/WSO. Later that year, in October, a national steering committee meeting in St. Louis voted to remove the WSO title from VVAW's name. The decision passed and "35 chapters walked out en masse," John Lindquist

⁶⁷ "VVAW/WSO Demonstration in Wash., D.C. set for July," *Winter Soldier*, May 1974, 3; "VVAW-WSO Demo Builds Unity!" *Winter Soldier*, August 1974, 7; "Vietnam Veterans Protest in Capital and Criticize Nixon," *New York Times*, July 3, 1974.

⁶⁸ Thorn, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 376-377.

⁶⁹ Kniffin, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 377.

⁷⁰ Danny Friedman, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 377.

recalled, leaving the RU's influence intact at the national level.⁷¹ To those moderate and libertarian members who found neither faction appealing, the resulting conclusion offered little comfort aside from the restoration of the organization's name to its original form. In a letter to the national office, the less ideological St. Louis chapter and Alabama region issued a joint statement criticizing the "excessive" use of Marxist-Leninist verbiage in the national newspaper, *Winter Soldier*. "Rhetoric really turns people off!" they criticized.⁷² Over in the Dayton, Ohio, chapter, members made similar complaints about the national office's newfound practice of democratic centralism under the RU's influence, giving those in Chicago near ironclad control over the decision-making process. The "growing centralization of the organization has alienated many people," they observed. In its place, the Dayton vets lobbied for greater pluralism. "[O]pen discussions are the best way to get people involved and provide a forum for all possible views to be considered," they said. Without it, "unity based on imposed discipline re-institutionalizes power and authority relations."⁷³ Both the St. Louis and Dayton chapters were purged for their seditious protests.

Yet if VVAW's decentralism left it vulnerable to infiltration and cooptation by outside groups, it also made a unilateral takeover difficult to achieve. Despite inflicting heavy damages on VVAW, the RU, now RCP (Revolutionary Communist Party), failed in its attempt to dismantle and subsume the withering veterans' group under its control. After a botched challenge by RCP activists to seize VVAW's national office in Chicago with guns, a second schism followed removing all RCP cadres from the organization in 1978. The majority of members who remained after the 1975 split had grown tired of RU/RCP politics. "They were developing a

⁷¹ Zangrilli, Romo, and Schneck, untitled paper on the expulsion of AIMF chapters in California, 1; Lindquist, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 382.

⁷² St. Louis Chapter/Alabama Region, "Criticisms of the Current Policy of Winter Soldier with Regard to Language, Content & Rigidity of Editorial Position," n.d., in author's possession.

⁷³ Dayton, Regional Report, December 14, 1974, 2, 3.

cult,” said Bill Branson.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, those still enamored with the RCP’s revolutionary vision established the Vietnam Veterans Against the War Anti-Imperialist (VVAW-AI) a year later as an ultra-left counterpoint to VVAW. Joe Urgo, VVAW’s former public relations officer, made the decision to follow the VVAW-AI faction, burning bridges with several of his comrades. “The question in VVAW became: How radical a change do we really want, and are we willing to fight for it?” he said. “I felt that many vets were trying to make peace with the United States and to work for a few changes from within. The national office in Chicago was beginning to take the focus off of being anti-imperialist. They weren’t being revolutionary.”⁷⁵

VVAW’s decentralized structure ultimately thwarted the ambitions of the RCP’s disciplined cadre. Outside of the national office, RCP adherents could never count on the kind of discipline they desired from local and state chapters. While several chapters folded before and after the 1975 split, many did so out of fatigue, not necessarily because they were outmaneuvered by the ideological tides associated with the RCP. “There were enough people who were still in VVAW around the country who were not RCP and were not about to be RCP,” recalled Bill Davis.⁷⁶ Chapters such as Milwaukee, built around a strong organizational base, were able to fend off sectionalism and carry VVAW’s tradition of community activism forward free of the ideological bickering so thoroughly entrenched in the national office. For the former Wisconsin coordinator John Lindquist, who loathed both the AIMF and RCP factions, once telling the latter to “eat shit and die,” it became a matter of preserving VVAW’s rightful legacy. “Unfortunately you will, in the long run, confuse people and drive them away from VVAW,” he wrote the RCP in a letter, “but like all other groups who are opportunist and dogmatic you will

⁷⁴ Branson, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 383.

⁷⁵ Urgo, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 385.

⁷⁶ Davis, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 387.

dry up and blow away like the dirt that you are.”⁷⁷ Lindquist and his partner Bailey held to this belief and in the interim used their enclave in Milwaukee to pursue the kind of community organizing heretofore synonymous with VVAW’s reputation. Said Pete Zastrow: “They kept [the chapter] together during a period when the organization said politics are absolutely primary and all this — what we called at the time touchy-feely [outreach] — has to go.”⁷⁸ Their efforts were not in vein, though the organization would never again command the kind of mass support it did in the early 1970s when membership rates soared into the tens of thousands. In many ways, VVAW devolved in the late 1970s and 1980s back to the kind of organization it started out as: a small regional peace group now confined to the Midwest with a few stalwart chapters on the coasts.

Pragmatic grassroots reform had always been VVAW’s greatest strength. Nineteen-seventy-eight saw VVAWers return to this tradition with their vigorous campaign to unveil the deadly connection between exposure to Agent Orange and the myriad illnesses Vietnam veterans later sustained. From 1962 to 1971, the United States dumped nineteen million gallons of herbicides over Vietnam destroying nearly five million acres of countryside as part of its defoliation campaign to deny enemy combatants protective cover. Agent Orange, the principal chemical defoliant used by the military, was first developed by the U.S. Center for Chemical and Biological Warfare in World War II.⁷⁹ During the Vietnam War, helicopters sprayed the herbicide over giant swaths of jungle vegetation to give American forces a tactical advantage. “We were told this was to provide ‘friendlies’ with clear fire zones,” said Milton Ross, a former

⁷⁷ John A. Lindquist to VVAW/RCP, September 13, 1978, Box 22, Folder 34, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁷⁸ Zastrow, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 387.

⁷⁹ Vets House, “Agent Orange: Questions and Answers,” n.d., 1, Box 23, Folder 30, VVAW Papers, WSHS; “What Is Agent Orange?” *The Veteran*, Fall 1978, 8; Fred A. Wilcox, *Waiting for an Army to Die: The Tragedy of Agent Orange* (Washington, D.C.: Seven Locks Press, 1989), xii.

Green Beret. Soldiers were also informed as late as 1969 that “[Agent] Orange is relatively nontoxic to man or animals,” when in fact its toxicity had been suspected for several years.⁸⁰ Soon after they started spraying the herbicide, chemical companies responsible for producing Agent Orange informed the government of its potential health hazards. High concentrations of dioxin, one of the most poisonous known contaminants, rendered the compound especially lethal. Symptoms of exposure included chloracne (a skin disease), nervous and mental disorders, depression, numbing of the extremities, liver damage, cancer, miscarriages, and birth defects.⁸¹

Despite such knowledge, the government denied any wrongdoing. But in 1977, two years after North Vietnamese and NLF forces took control of Saigon, bringing the war to its final conclusion, the VA began fielding complaints about a variety of health problems from Vietnam veterans. Maude DeVictor, a counselor in the benefits division at the West Side VA hospital in Chicago, took note of the sudden surge after a chance conversation with the wife of Charlie Owens, a Vietnam vet dying of cancer. “He had served in Nam, and was convinced that his cancer had been caused by chemicals sprayed there,” DeVictor said.⁸² A few days after their conversation in June, Owens passed away. DeVictor contacted the Air Force Surgeon General to learn more about Agent Orange. The Air Force acknowledged it was a dioxin but refused to concede that exposure to the contaminant had caused Owens’s illness. The VA concurred, and initially refused a claim to Owens’s widow citing his death as non-service related. Not satisfied, DeVictor began asking questions of her own about dioxin symptoms, polling as many Vietnam veterans and their widows as she could. Her superiors ordered her to stop. Instead, she went public with her findings in a documentary produced by a CBS affiliate in Chicago. The television

⁸⁰ Shaun Carberry, “Agent Orange Now Affecting Vietnam GI’s,” *Army Times*, April 1980, 6.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸² Susan Davis, “Maude DeVictor,” *Ms. Magazine*, June 1980, reprinted by VVAW, Box 22, Folder 4, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

news special, *Agent Orange: The Deadly Fog*, aired on March 23, 1978, and broke the story wide open.⁸³ Past and present VVAWers immediately latched on to the issue. “It was a revitalization for the whole organization,” said John Lindquist. “The whole agenda of the [March] national meeting went right into Agent Orange.”⁸⁴

Within days, VVAWers were back on the streets protesting. On March 29, members of the Chicago chapter held a picket line outside the regional VA office to demand immediate testing and treatment “for all veterans found to be infected with the effects of Agent Orange.”⁸⁵ To further broadcast the dangers of exposure, veterans in some cities petitioned local television stations to replay the CBS documentary. They also filed a lawsuit under the Freedom of Information Act to pressure the VA into disclosing what knowledge it possessed of the deadly herbicide.⁸⁶ In late October, the organization held “Agent Orange Day.” Chapters in San Francisco, Minneapolis, Milwaukee, Ann Arbor, Chicago, and New York City participated in the event to disclose “the situation vets face and to demand that [the] Veterans Administration publicize, test for, treat, and compensate victims of Agent Orange poisoning.”⁸⁷ On the coasts, members in San Francisco and New York City visited recruiting stations to caution potential soldiers about the VA’s history of broken promises. In Chicago, the chapter unfurled a banner outside Daley Plaza, in the downtown core, demanding proper treatment for Agent Orange. Further north in Milwaukee, VVAWers assembled a caravan and drove through the city to the VA to confront officials about a series of recently exposed “phony tests” administered to vets believed to be suffering from dioxin poisoning.⁸⁸ The revelation was discouraging but not

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Lindquist, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 388.

⁸⁵ “Press Release,” March 28, 1978, Box 6A, Folder 19, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁸⁶ “Defoliant Agent Orange: Chemical Time Bomb in Vietnam Veterans,” *The Veteran*, Summer 1978, 11.

⁸⁷ “Vets Demand Care, Hit Blackout,” *The Veteran*, Winter 1978/1979, 9.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

surprising. Said the veterans: “What it all comes down to is this: the people who run this country used us once to fight their rotten war; once they had us, they were perfectly fine to throw us aside. The whole treatment of the issue of AGENT ORANGE is further proof, if any were needed.”⁸⁹

Not trusting the VA to do its job without first being prodded, members in the Midwestern chapters undertook a variety of strategies at the community level to secure the organization’s demands for testing, treatment, and compensation. The most creative endeavors came from the Wisconsin-Minnesota region. In fall 1979, the Minnesota chapter partnered with the Vietnam Veterans Civic Council (VVCC) to launch a comprehensive outreach campaign to contact the state’s 51,000 Vietnam veterans and identify potential Agent Orange victims. Within three months the *ad hoc* coalition succeeded in identifying 8,500 vets concerned about the possible health implications resulting from exposure. By April 1980, the number exceeded 9,000. Prior to this, only 4,000 veterans nationwide had been screened by the VA over a two-year period; a paltry seventy of which were done in Minnesota. Most Vietnam vets were unaware that the VA offered a free health screening program. To correct this, VVAW and the VVCC, as part of their outreach initiative, lobbied Congress to establish a fleet of mobile VA Medical Center screening teams to reach incarcerated veterans as well as those living in more remote areas.⁹⁰ “We wanted to make sure that *all* our veterans were informed about this issue, and that they had an opportunity to avail themselves to the health screening program conducted by the VA,” stated one activist.⁹¹

⁸⁹ VVAW national office to fellow veterans, n.d. [1978], 2, Box 6A, Folder 19, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

⁹⁰ “8,500 Vietnam Veterans Request Agent Orange Screening From VAMC in Minnesota,” unpublished article, December 1979, 1-3, Box 22, Folder 5, VVAW Papers, WSHS; Vietnam Veterans Against the War, “Only a Slight Skin Rash,” *The Northern Star*, April 1980.

⁹¹ “8,500 Vietnam Veterans,” 3.

VVAW's Wisconsin chapters attacked the issue of testing and treatment with equal vigor. In December 1979, the Milwaukee members helped organize the first Winter Soldier Investigation of Agent Orange in Chicago. At the event, veterans explored America's use of chemical warfare and highlighted dioxin's dangerous effects on Vietnam vets. By this point Milwaukee had established itself as the nucleus of VVAW's Agent Orange awareness project and in 1982 published its "Agent Orange Dossier," a detailed self-help booklet designed to empower veterans. Its contents included testimony from the Agent Orange Winter Soldier hearing; an easy-to-follow guide on how to acquire a screening test; a list of "analytical procedures" performable by a family doctor; information on what chemicals to avoid; and tips on how to decrease the risk of re-exposure.⁹² Gathering materials for the dossier took time and energy. Members and supporters spent long hours in libraries and around kitchen tables gathering data to support their case. "We compiled all of the dioxin studies that were available worldwide in a book about six inches thick. We shot to hell their premise that there was no information on dioxin or Agent Orange as far as adverse side effects," said Madison's Sukie Wachtendonk.⁹³ As they assembled the database, VVAWers in Wisconsin made active contributions to the National Veterans Task Force on Agent Orange, a coalition of veteran and environmental groups, and assisted vets in joining a massive class-action lawsuit filed against the country's nine major chemical defoliant producers during the Vietnam War.⁹⁴

In each of these activities, self-help stood out as a dominant theme. "Vets have to build the fight to get testing and treatment for Agent Orange — because, if we don't do it ourselves, it won't ever happen," VVAW insisted.⁹⁵ Indeed, the government's refusal to accept culpability

⁹² "Agent Orange Dossier," 1-18.

⁹³ Sukie Wachtendonk, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 390.

⁹⁴ "Agent Orange Dossier," 11.

⁹⁵ "Agent Orange Investigation," pamphlet, n.d. (late 1979), Box 6A, Folder 19, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

and treat those suffering from exposure to the deadly herbicide did little to quell the group's longstanding mistrust of the state. They were not alone in their suspicion. By the late 1970s, such attitudes were pervasive throughout much of the country. The combined excesses of the Vietnam War, Watergate, the so-called "imperial presidency," and agencies like the CIA and FBI had produced in the United States a trenchant cynicism toward politics and government. A 1976 *Time* magazine survey found that only 27 percent of Americans approved of Congress and 13 percent the executive office.⁹⁶ While only a handful of voters actually wished to repeal the welfare state, enough had expressed their displeasure with the expanding federal bureaucracy to prompt both major political parties into realigning their platforms around promises of tax cuts and economic deregulation.⁹⁷

Historians have commonly regarded such trends as evidence of conservatism's rise to dominance in the 1970s and 1980s, supplanting a by-then weak and anemic postwar liberal order. Despite its many victories, however, conservatism did not go uncontested in the 1980s. Nor did it maintain a monopoly on antistatist ideals. VVAWers, while more reformist than revolutionary in this period, continued to organize against abusive state practices and for an end to bureaucratic rule. This was true for legions of small community organizations in the 1970s and 1980s, irrespective of political orientation, that relied on a "front porch ethos" of self-help, grassroots activism to execute change. As Michael Foley writes, "The main mistake scholars have made in evaluating this period has been to conflate a rising skepticism of government with the rise of the right."⁹⁸ What differentiated VVAW's antistatism from other more conservative iterations in this period was its rejection of the sanctity of private property. Whereas right-leaning libertarians loathed government as an impediment to the freedom of property, VVAWers

⁹⁶ DeLeon, *American as Anarchist*, 143.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁹⁸ Foley, *Front Porch Politics*, 6.

rebuffed such narrowness, insisting instead that sustained political engagement could right the wrongs brought on by government overreach and fashion new community-centered modes of statehood free of rigid bureaucracy. Like other civic-minded activists of the day, VVAW's anger with government and its failings did not preclude it from viewing some form of government as part of the solution.⁹⁹ To accomplish its goals, VVAWers thus pursued a flexible strategy much akin to what characterized the organization in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In the realm of VA reform, a perennial concern of VVAW's, some members took to working within the federal bureaucracy to exact change. In June 1979, Congress passed the Veterans Health Care Amendment Act setting aside \$12 million in appropriations for the Vietnam Veteran Outreach Program, a special community-based service subsumed under the VA structure to provide Vietnam veterans with special readjustment counseling. The 1979 bill ordered the creation of ninety-one "Vet Centers," small storefronts strategically located in downtown urban centers. Four years later, 135 were in operation. To regain the trust of Vietnam-era veterans, the federal government granted the Vet Centers considerable autonomy in addressing areas of education, unemployment, post-traumatic stress, and community outreach. In fact, the original concept for the Vet Center program, co-developed by Vietnam veteran Floyd "Shad" Meshad, a rogue VA worker from Los Angeles, echoed many of the techniques and practices of VVAW's community activism.¹⁰⁰ Traces of its rap groups, drug treatment sessions, halfway houses, R&R farms, and multi-service self-help projects like Twice Born Men, were palpable, if not deliberate. Within two years, 80 percent of team counselors were Vietnam veterans, several of whom had ties to VVAW. A few were even still members, and stretched the limits of acceptability with their disdain for formal protocol, paperwork, and bureaucratic

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

¹⁰⁰ Nicosia, *Home to War*, 366-367, 506-522.

regulation. In the case of Jack McCloskey, who ran San Francisco's Waller Street Vet Center, working as a federal employee in no way assuaged his antistatist politics. Rather, he remained suspicious of the government's role in financing Vet Center operations, cautioning against the state's ulterior motives. "Here you've got a bastard program that in a way became legitimized, and for them to legitimize it they had to have more control over it," he warned.¹⁰¹

In time, the government would do its best to rein in the Vet Center program, and replace its free-wheeling team leaders with diffident bureaucrats to "toe the VA line."¹⁰² Until then, VVAWers took what advantages they could at the local level to ease patients' burdens. In 1979, the Milwaukee chapter began collaborating with sympathetic officials at the Wood VA Medical Center to run its Vietnam Veterans Outreach Program. Two years later the partnership remained strong with members sitting on as active representatives of the center's Special Outreach Committee and Vietnam-Era Veterans Advisory Committee. Their knowledge and "expertise in working with Vietnam veterans" made them ideal candidates to fill such positions. Local administrators, for their part, generally appreciated their "working relationship" with the Milwaukee chapter, as well as the "untapped energy" it yielded.¹⁰³ But the veterans' affiliations with the VA did not necessarily indicate approval of the agency. "Let's face it; very few vets go to the V.A. willingly," the organization contended. "A vet has to be pretty sick to tolerate the lines, the bureaucrats, the poor care, the need for interpreters to talk to the doctor —the list goes on and on."¹⁰⁴ Staying true to their objectives of improving patient care and divesting the VA of its voluminous red tape, the Milwaukee vets used their position within the agency to advance

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 546.

¹⁰² See "Vet Centers Under Attack: Exclusive Report," *The Veteran*, November/December 1982, 1-2; Nicosia, *Home to War*, 531-540.

¹⁰³ Y.C. Parris to Robert Lenham, November 19, 1979; "Special Outreach Committee Meeting Minutes," January 23, 1981; Leon E. Edman to John Lindquist, October 6, 1981; and Y.C. Parris, "Vietnam-Era Veterans Advisory Committee," November 6, 1981, Box 23, Folder 39, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹⁰⁴ "V.A. Rule Change: Medical Care," *The Veteran*, November/December, 1981, 9.

discussion of pensions, access to peer counseling, Agent Orange screenings, and disability compensation.¹⁰⁵ When the Reagan administration threatened cutbacks for vital VA programming in March 1981, the Milwaukee vets joined with other upset chapters in staging a wave of synchronized protests outside local VA facilities. VVAWers kept pressure on the government throughout the decade, organizing demonstrations against further reductions and using its revived newspaper, *The Veteran*, “to help vets by-pass some of the VA’s red tape” and secure “the benefits that are ours, but which we often have to fight to get.”¹⁰⁶

Battles over the VA were not the only front on which VVAW confronted the state. Struggles to preserve local democratic control grew in the mid-1980s as communities debated the issue of military recruitment in high school. After the discontinuation of conscription in 1973, the United States changed to an all-volunteer military force requiring a variety of new techniques — advertising, school programs, aptitude tests, teacher training — to reach prospective recruits. Throughout the eighties, the U.S. Armed Forces honed these methods into a sophisticated, multi-billion dollar PR program that by 1990 conscripted over 300,000 men and women a year at a price of nearly \$8,000 per recruit.¹⁰⁷ Access to high schools proved essential for its success. With thousands of full-time recruiters nationwide, the military relied on cooperative teachers and administrators to obtain student directories, attend career days, and use guidance offices to interview possible recruits. They also maintained over a thousand JROTC units (Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps) in American high schools, offering school credit for “studying military history, marching, and participating in target practice.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ “Special Outreach Committee Meeting Minutes”; Parris, “Vietnam-Era Veterans Advisory Committee.”

¹⁰⁶ “Vets Protest Cutbacks,” *The Veteran*, Spring 1981, 4-5; “Vet’s Notes: Cutting Thru Red Tape, Making Sense of Regs,” *The Veteran*, November/December, 1981, 2; “Operation Dewey Canyon IV: Vets March on Wash.,” *The Veteran*, April/May 1982, 1.

¹⁰⁷ “More Than They Want You To Know...About the Military,” pamphlet, 1991, Box 30, Folder 24, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Not surprisingly, VVAWers took issue with the military's tactics and launched a forceful campaign to provide young men and women with an alternative perspective on enlistment. In New York and New Jersey, chapters distributed an information packet for students, parents, and teachers featuring articles on recruitment policies and a list of questions to consider before enlisting. When plans for an ROTC program at Martin Luther King High School in New York City were proposed, East Coast coordinator Clarence Fitch led a movement to halt its development, calling it an "insult to the teachings and memory of Dr. King."¹⁰⁹ To better educate students, the national office offered "pre-enlistment counselling" to counter "the John Wayne image projected by military recruiters," while members in the Madison, Wisconsin, chapter organized a grassroots drive to limit forceful recruiting tactics in the city's public high schools.¹¹⁰ As per the Madison school board's guidelines, recruiters' interaction with students was to be limited to Career Days, like all other employers. Yet in practice, frequent, more aggressive visits were the norm with military recruiters showing up at some area high schools more than one hundred times a year.¹¹¹ To halt the practice, VVAWers visited classrooms to discuss "the draft, recruiters, military life, and the Vietnam War"; started a hotline for students and families being harassed by recruiters; distributed business cards offering free counsel; and sponsored an open forum on military recruitment with local school board candidates, making it a central issue of the city's 1985 spring election.¹¹² Their efforts paid dividends. In June, the Madison School Board voted to "limit military recruiters to no more than two pre-announced

¹⁰⁹ "Military Service: Choice or Chance?" information packet, n.d., Box 20, Folder 49; "In Memory of Clarence Jerome Fitch," memorial booklet, n.d. (c. May 1990), Box 30, Folder 16, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹¹⁰ "Pre-Enlistment Counselling," flyer, n.d., Box 20, Folder 49, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹¹¹ Jacob Stockinger, "Military Recruiting Tactics Challenged," *Capital Times*, January 29, 1985; Frank Schultz, "School Board Hopefuls Rap Military Recruiters," *Daily Cardinal*, March 13, 1985.

¹¹² Schultz, "School Board Hopefuls"; Open letter from Dennis Kroll to teachers in the Madison School Board, n.d., Box 20, Folder 49; VVAW military recruitment incident reports, 1985, Box 20, Folder 49; VVAW business card, n.d., Box 20, Folder 49; Poster for the VVAW-sponsored "School Board and Candidate Forum on Military Recruiting in Schools," March 12, [1985], Box 20, Folder 49, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

visits per year,” and “end the unscheduled distribution...of free promotional materials” in classrooms by representatives of the Armed Forces.¹¹³

The decision marked a victory for VVAW and its long-held localist belief in the principles of community control. The people, not the federal government, they argued, had the right to determine military recruitment policies in their schools. Throughout the 1980s, VVAWers applied these same standards to the realm of foreign policy as Cold War hardliners in the White House looked to reassert U.S. dominance in Central America and “reestablish its credibility in the aftermath of Vietnam.”¹¹⁴ Fearful of being dragged into another quagmire, VVAW members protested U.S. funding of the Salvadorian death squads in El Salvador and spoke out against the invasion of Granada in 1983.¹¹⁵ But it was the White House’s proxy war against the left-wing Sandinista government in Nicaragua that drew the strongest response. For many in the organization the deepening conflict was an unconscionable abridgment of the Nicaraguan peoples’ right to self-determination, and brought back memories of Vietnam. To help right the situation, and bring relief to the war-torn country, VVAW sent a thirteen member delegation in April 1986 to survey the conflict and talk to those Nicaraguans most adversely affected by the Reagan administration’s aid to the “Contra” (counterrevolutionary) forces.¹¹⁶ By this point, such expeditions had become something of a trend among concerned U.S. citizens. An estimated 100,000 Americans ventured to Nicaragua in the 1980s as part of the “anti-Contra War campaign” to aid the Nicaraguan people and educate U.S. communities upon their return home. VVAWers became important contributors of this campaign, relaying what they had witnessed at

¹¹³ Jacob Stockinger, “Veterans See Precedent in Local Recruiting Limits,” *Capital Times*, June 25, 1985.

¹¹⁴ George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 886.

¹¹⁵ “VVAW Chapter Reports,” *The Veteran*, Fall 1983, 6-7; “VVAW Chapter Report!” *The Veteran*, February/March 1984, 7; Bill Davis, “Grenada,” *The Veteran*, Spring 1984, 7.

¹¹⁶ “Socio-Political Program,” itinerary for VVAW’s Nicaraguan tour, April 12-19, 1986, Box 12, Folder 31, VVAW Papers, WSHS; “Speaking from Experience,” *Barricada Internacional*, May 1, 1986.

teach-ins and other public demonstrations, and helping to turn the hotly contested foreign policy matter into a vibrant local issue — a practice some called “citizen diplomacy” or “détente from below.”¹¹⁷ Whatever its name, the veterans’ message was simple and clear: “In Nicaragua, people just want to make their own decisions and their own mistakes without anyone telling them what to do.”¹¹⁸

VVAW’s outreach did not stop there. Two years after its expedition, members on the East Coast partnered with the Veterans for Peace and six other organizations to form the Veterans Peace Convoy to “deliver infant nutrition and health care products...to the children of Nicaragua.” Caravans departed from Caribou, Maine, Minneapolis, and Seattle, and weaved its way through over one hundred cities and forty-two states before merging together on June 7, 1988, in Laredo, Texas. In total, more than one hundred participants volunteered to drive thirty-seven trucks and buses filled with food, medicine, clothes, and tools for what the organizers dubbed “a people-to-people offer of peace.”¹¹⁹ Red-and-black streamers and flags waved from the vehicles in solidarity with the Sandinistas, while others carried signs reading “No Contra Aid” and “Hands off Central America.”¹²⁰ At each stop, church groups, political organizations, and local officials turned out to donate funds and aid. On June 15, the convoy arrived at the Mexican border checkpoint but was blocked by U.S. Customs. After a month of political and legal wrangling, the fifteen remaining vehicles that had not been impounded or forced to return

¹¹⁷ Roger Peace, *A Call to Conscience: The Anti-Contra War Campaign* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 3, 102-113; “Vietnam Vets Testify on Visit,” poster, April 23, [1986], Box 12, Folder 31; “Central America Teach-In Program & Luncheon,” poster, May 8, [1986], Box 13, Folder 31; “Nicaragua: The Next Vietnam?” poster, July 22, [1986], Box 12, Folder 31, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹¹⁸ “Speaking from Experience.”

¹¹⁹ “Veterans Peace Convoy to Nicaragua,” poster, n.d. (c. April-May 1988), Box 31, Folder 1; Ben Chitty to convoy contributors, March 2, 1989, 1-2, Box 32, Folder 3, VVAW Papers, WSHS; Peace, *Call to Conscience*, 232.

¹²⁰ Dan Dinello, “Peace Convoy: The Road to Nicaragua,” *Chicago Reader*, June 2, 1988, <www.chicagoreader.com/Chicago.peace-convoy/Content?oid=872283> (accessed 28 February 2014).

home were permitted to proceed and rolled into Managua, Nicaragua, on July 29.¹²¹ A second shipment carrying the residual cargo arrived four weeks later. Collectively, the project delivered more than three hundred tons of material aid, including thirty vehicles for “orphanages, youth centers, schools, and other humanitarian organizations in Nicaragua.”¹²² Empowerment, not just sustenance, was the veterans’ chief aim, a sponsor explained. “They’re giving something to the children of Nicaragua to help support their struggle for self-determination. In self-determination, there is dignity, there is self-respect, and there is a future.”¹²³

All through the decade, and into the early 1990s, VVAW members remained vigilant critics of U.S. foreign policy. In September 1989, it sent a fact-finding tour to Panama at the request of the independent research organization, Center for International Political Studies, in advance of the American invasion. Inspired by the Nicaraguan delegations VVAW and others had participated in only a few years prior, the veterans undertook the new expedition out of deep concern that “another Vietnam might be developing in Panama.”¹²⁴ It was with similar alarm that VVAWers across the country stood up and spoke out against the 1991 Persian Gulf War, taking “immediate action.” Members in New York City voiced their concerns at public meetings, press conferences, and on radio programs. In Milwaukee they sent letters of protest to elected officials and care packages to the troops. The Kansas City chapter released a statement demanding “an immediate ceasefire,” while on the national stage VVAW joined in establishing the Veterans Coalition

¹²¹ Chitty to convoy contributors, 2; Peace, *Call to Conscience*, 232.

¹²² Chitty to convoy contributors, 2; Steve Somerstein, “‘Big City’ Arrives in Nicaragua,” *DMZ* (newsletter), n.d., attached to Ben Chitty’s letter to convey contributors, Box 32, Folder 3, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹²³ Dinello, “Peace Convoy.”

¹²⁴ “Vietnam Veterans Fact-Finding Delegation to Panama,” pamphlet, September 3-6, 1989, Box 30, Folder 32, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

Against Intervention in the Persian Gulf with the slogan: “No Blood for Oil.”¹²⁵ Rather than mellowing in their advancing age, past and present VVAWers redoubled their efforts in the post-Cold War period to ensure the lessons of Vietnam were not forgotten. “Vietnam taught us that we have neither the right nor the ability to be the policeman of the world,” they said in criticism of the Gulf War. “As citizens, we have both the right and the responsibility to speak out in protest. As veterans, we have seen this happen before and cannot let it happen again.”¹²⁶

For much of VVAW’s history, protest remained the conventional platform from which to communicate this message. But it was not the only format. In 1972, Jan Barry, Larry Rottmann, and Basil Paquet produced *Winning Hearts and Minds*, a poetry anthology distributed by VVAW’s own independent publishing house, 1st Casualty Press. Assembled over a four year period, the editors arranged the collection “as a series of shifting scenes which describe, in rough chronological order, a tour of combat in S.E. Asia.”¹²⁷ In total, more than thirty Vietnam veterans contributed. Some had been published before, others had not, but their shared status as Vietnam veterans gave the compilation “the kind of forceful impact and blunt language that only soldiers who have first-hand knowledge of combat can convey.”¹²⁸ Wanting to secure the widest audience possible, Barry and Rottmann approached over forty publishers to print the anthology. None were interested and so they established 1st Casualty Press with donations from movement activists and sympathizers. The interfaith peace group, Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam (CALCAV), offered to help type the book. Antiwar academic Noam Chomsky became

¹²⁵ Clarence Fitch Chapter [New York City-New Jersey], “An Urgent Appeal to All Members and Friends,” n.d. [c. January 1991], Box 30, Folder 19; Milwaukee Chapter, “Attention in the Compound,” newsletter, n.d. [November 1990], 1, Box 22, Folder 29; Kansas City Chapter, “Statement on the Persian Gulf War,” newsletter, February 16, 1991, 1, Box 4, Folder 13; “Say No to War in the Middle East,” flyer, January 1991, Box 9, Folder 42, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹²⁶ “Say No to War in the Middle East.”

¹²⁷ Larry Rottmann, Jan Barry, and Basil T. Paquet, eds., “Introduction,” *Winning Hearts and Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972), v.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, v; Caroline Slocock, “Winning Hearts and Minds: The 1st Casualty Press,” *Journal of American Studies* 16, no. 1 (April 1982): 113.

a trustee for the Press. This grassroots, do-it-yourself approach befitted the publication which in its final pages offered a “note to the reader” on how to maximize its usage through community engagement. “Read it aloud,” “recopy it,” “dramatize it,” “give it as a gift,” and “sing it.” “This is more than a book of poetry,” they explained. “If properly used, this volume should be dog-eared within a month.”¹²⁹

Winning Hearts and Minds proved a tremendous success. Critically, it received favorable coverage in the *New York Times*, *Midwest* (magazine of the *Chicago-Sun Times*), the *St. Louis Dispatch*, and the *New York Times Book Review*. Commercially, it sold 20,000 copies in its first two runs — a tremendous feat for an independently produced collection of poems. With its viability no longer in question, 1st Casualty Press agreed in the summer of 1972 to a contract with McGraw-Hill for a joint publication of *Winning Hearts and Minds*, increasing the number of printed copies to 45,000.¹³⁰ As a cultural statement, *Winning Hearts and Minds* and 1st Casualty Press had a tremendous impact on the Vietnam veteran community. Over two hundred veteran writers submitted manuscripts to the Press, some of which appeared in its second anthology, *Free Fire Zone*, a collection of short stories edited by Rottmann, Paquet, and an ex-Marine, Wayne Kerlin.¹³¹ Less successful than its predecessor, *Free Fire Zone* would be the final volume published by 1st Casualty Press which disbanded toward the end of 1973, canceling plans for a third collection titled *Postmortem*. Despite the Press’s untimely demise, VVAW had set a standard for soldier poetry with *Winning Hearts and Minds* that outlasted its small publishing house and spawned a movement of creative reflection by Vietnam vets that carried through into

¹²⁹ Rottmann, Barry, and Paquet, “Notes to the Reader,” *Winning Hearts and Minds*, 118-119; Slocock, “Winning Hearts and Minds,” 114-115.

¹³⁰ Slocock, “Winning Hearts and Minds,” 115, 108.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 108; Wayne Karlin, Basil T. Paquet, and Larry Rottmann, eds., *Free Fire Zone: Short Stories by Vietnam Veterans* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973).

the next two decades.¹³² The list of works included Jan Barry's *Peace Is Our Profession*, Larry Rottmann's *Voices from the Ho Chi Minh Trail*, and the entire bibliography of W.D. Ehrhart, referred to by some as the "dean of Vietnam War poetry" for such anthologies as *Carrying the Darkness* and *Unaccustomed Mercy*.¹³³

Together, these collections articulated a voice in America that stood in stark contrast to the rising jingoism of the 1980s and early 1990s. Where right-wing Hollywood fantasies like Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo: First Blood Part II* and John Milius's *Red Dawn* glorified combat, Vietnam veteran poetry countered by stressing the "real physical dangers and emotional costs" of warfare.¹³⁴ Poetry's efficacy as a conduit for truth had been apparent to VVAW from very early on. "[After *Winning Hearts and Minds*,] we got invited all kinds of places — colleges, high schools, other places — to read the poetry. And people would listen," Barry remembered. "Every age group, no matter where you were." The short, sharp verses offered audiences haunting statements of testimony not otherwise easily expressed outside the creative voice. "By condensing the emotions of a certain incident or two, usually one incident in a poem, you really catch people's attention," he noted.¹³⁵ For some veterans, artistic expression became the most effective means of articulating and bearing witness to their combat experiences. "What stories can do, I guess, is make things present," wrote the novelist and Vietnam veteran Tim O'Brien. "I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can

¹³² Adam Gilbert, "'And the fire still burns': Vietnam War Poetry, Moral Witness, and *Winning Hearts and Minds*," *War, Literature, and the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities* 25, no. 1 & 2 (2013): 14-15.

¹³³ Jan Barry, ed, *Peace Is Our Profession: Poems and Passages of War Protest* (Montclair, NJ: East River Anthology, 1981); Larry Rottmann, *Voices from the Ho Chi Minh Trail: Poetry of America and Vietnam, 1965-1993* (Desert Hot Springs, CA: Event Horizon Press, 1993); W.D. Ehrhart, ed., *Carrying the Darkness: American Indochina—The Poetry of the Vietnam War* (New York: Avon Books, 1985); W.D. Ehrhart, ed., *Unaccustomed Mercy: Soldier-Poets of the Vietnam War* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 1989). The quotation comes from Ehrhart, *Unaccustomed Mercy*, xii.

¹³⁴ Eduardo Cohen, Veterans Speakers Alliance, to fellow veterans, July 29, 1985, 1, Box 17, Folder 16, VVAW Papers, WSHS.

¹³⁵ Barry, interview with author, October 30, 2013.

be brave. I can make myself feel again.”¹³⁶ Through poetry and prose countless Vietnam veterans were able to reclaim their voices and for the first time speak the unspeakable. Oliver Stone’s trio of Vietnam War movies — *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, and *Heaven and Earth* — extended this to the realm of filmmaking. Collectively, these artistic mediums became cultural expressions of VVAW’s larger legacy of self-help in the tradition of its rap groups, rehab farms, and halfway houses. That is, sources of healing that helped mitigate the emotional disruptions of war.

The longevity of VVAW’s cultural legacy paralleled the lasting influence of its political achievements. The idea, expressed by some VVAW chroniclers, that “[b]y the fall of Saigon in May 1975, VVAW/WSO had become just another small left-wing splinter group,” is accurate but misleading.¹³⁷ To end the story in the mid-1970s ignores a vital portion of VVAW’s history. Despite the RU’s ascension to power, VVAW’s decentralism frustrated the hardline leftist sect’s attempt at achieving a more thorough and complete takeover, even as it left the group vulnerable to subversive infiltration from without. When VVAW finally reconstituted itself in 1978, following the RU’s extrication, it did so without the thriving base of mass support it once commanded, but its influence and passion remained steadfast. Rather than self-combusting, VVAWers transitioned from a politics of revolution to reform with little difficulty. While the national milieu may have changed, their message of peace and suspicion of top-down authority continued unabated. Community activism stood as central to the organization’s identity in the 1980s as it did upon its founding in 1967. Agent Orange, the Vet Centers, military recruitment, the anti-Contra campaign, poetry and prose — each issue evoked, in their own way, VVAW’s continued distrust of centralized bureaucratic rule. The war in Vietnam may have ended, but the

¹³⁶ Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Broadway Books, 1990), 180.

¹³⁷ Crandell, “They Moved the Town,” 152.

group's localist vision persisted. "I have no reason to trust or believe my government," John Kniffin concluded shortly before his death in September 2002. The dissonance between his sense of duty and mistrust of authority continued to vex the ex-Marine. "My dilemma is that I have taken an oath 'to defend the government and constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic.' What do I do when my government becomes the greatest enemy of the constitution?" he asked.¹³⁸ The question could have been rhetorical. His years in VVAW were answer enough.

¹³⁸ John W. Kniffin to Senator John F. Kerry, n.d. (c. late 2001), Box 1, Folder 17, Terry J. DuBose Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas <<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=16360117019>> (accessed 10 March 2014).

EPILOGUE

By the time of the anti-Gulf War protests, VVAW's political influence had been significantly reduced. While activism continued to play an important role in the organization, its strengths derived more from its symbolic identity. The national office in Chicago did its best to keep up appearances by publishing its newspaper, *The Veteran*, and organizing local campaigns to bring awareness to the staggering rates of homelessness among Vietnam-era veterans. But as the group's membership continued to subside, so too did its day-to-day operations. Once active and unruly, VVAW by the 1990s had been reduced to a Chicago post office box with a few nominal regional coordinators. Like the aging veterans of the World Wars and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade who attended antiwar rallies in the 1960s and 1980s, VVAW's activism had transitioned to one of symbolic affiliation. That is to say, the weight of the members' individual statuses as Vietnam veterans had eclipsed any organizational clout or power that VVAW once had. In some respects, this emphasis on group identity had always been a part of VVAW's history. From the beginning, in 1967, VVAWers derived their authority as antiwar activists from their firsthand experiences in Vietnam. In the early 1970s, this gave the group a near unassailable credibility. But in the 1990s, VVAW's organization clout had waned. Whereas VVAWers once stood on the vanguard of antiwar activism, they now embraced their role as elder statesmen to a diminished peace movement, relying on the symbolic status they carried in a society that tends to lionize veterans of past wars.

Events in the early 2000s, however, served the dual outcome of thrusting VVAW back into the spotlight, yet also potentially threatening to undermine its credibility. The 2004 Democratic presidential primaries did much to reawaken the political Right's indignation toward the antiwar veterans when conservative critics raised questions regarding Democratic frontrunner

John Kerry's association with VVAW, as well as his presence at the contentious national steering committee meeting where Scott Camil's plan to assassinate select congressional hawks was presented and voted down.¹ Kerry (falsely) denied being in attendance, and the issue raged on in far-right circles in the early years of the Internet, where partisan ideologues broadened their attacks to include all VVAWers, whom they referred to contemptuously as "pseudo-soldiers," "men who had never set foot on the battlefield, or left the comforts of home, or even served in uniform except in mock contempt of the military."² Though baseless, such allegations became gospels of truth among conservative hardliners who intensified their campaign-trail mudslinging with a television advertisement produced by a small group calling itself "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth." Based on dubious testimony provided by thirteen men said to have served with Kerry in Vietnam, the thirty second ad spot called into question the former VVAW national officer and Democratic Party nominee's military service, claiming he "lied about his war record," "betrayed all his shipmates," and "dishonored his country." Although it played in only a few small market areas, the advertisement drew national attention and received substantial airplay on nightly news programs in their coverage of the controversy. Additional attack ads soon followed, rendering Kerry's military record (and by association the rest of VVAW's) a key focal point of the election he narrowly lost to Republican challenger George W. Bush.³

Yet even in its besieged and contracted state, VVAW remained relatively active. In fact, despite the conservative smear campaign, the early 2000s saw something of a mini-revival for the organization as members joined a vocal chorus of Americans in condemning President

¹ Thomas H. Lipscomb, "How Kerry Quit Veterans Group Amid Dark Plot," *New York Sun*, March 12, 2004; "Kerry and Kansas City," *New York Sun*, March 19, 2004.

² As quoted in Gary Kulik, *"War Stories": False Atrocity Tales, Swift Boaters, and Winter Soldiers—What Really Happened in Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc., 2009), 100.

³ Amy Tully Eriksson, "From Lt. Kerry to 'Hanoi John': Gender and Vietnam Remembrance in the 2004 Presidential Election Campaign," (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2013), 163-164.

Bush's military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. Their presence lent experience to the antiwar cause, and influenced the founding of Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW). In March 2008, IVAW held "Winter Soldier: Iraq and Afghanistan," a four-day investigation featuring more than two hundred veterans and active-duty soldiers in Silver Spring, Maryland, to discuss the brutal atrocities they committed and witnessed during their tours of duty. The event was a self-conscious homage to VVAW's own Winter Soldier Investigation held thirty-seven years earlier in Detroit, and received active support from those still attached to the organization.⁴ Individually, former members, too, kept up the good fight often utilizing those connections accrued from their tenure in VVAW. "People stayed in touch as individuals through VVAW," Jan Barry explained. "When they're working on a project they reach out to all the people who they knew through VVAW to network on that project."⁵ Barry himself sustained an active presence in peace and justice struggles after leaving the organization in 1971. In addition to composing antiwar poetry, he published a how-to-guide for civic activists, founded the Essex County Peace Office in his home state of New Jersey, and today acts as an advisor to the "Warrior Writers" project to assist Iraq and Afghanistan veterans find creative outlets for reflection.⁶ Barry's path paralleled that of several members. Said Wisconsin's Annie Bailey: "VVAW was a transitional organization. Thousands and thousands of guys came through the organization and readjusted in VVAW and went on to other organizations."⁷

The group's emphasis on decentralization had done much to facilitate and encourage such engagement. Its anarchical organizational structure — or lack thereof — helped build VVAW

⁴ Anna Badkhen, "Veterans Recall Horrors of War in Live Broadcast," *Boston Globe*, March 16, 2008; see also related articles in *The Veterans*, Spring 2008, 1, 2, 12-21.

⁵ Barry, interview with author, October 30, 2013.

⁶ *Ibid.*; Jan Barry, *A Citizen's Guide to Grassroots Campaigns* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

⁷ Bailey, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 400.

into a united front, knitting together a range of politically dissimilar opinions housed jointly under an amorphous antiwar Vietnam veterans' culture. Even though decentralism came with a host of perils, it also enabled the antiauthoritarian vets to organize within a framework that was comfortable to them. Without such a libertarian environment, and the freedom to pursue what interested them most, it remains uncertain as to whether VVAWers would have stuck with the organization and developed a concern for other causes and movements. Some no doubt would have, while others clearly benefited from engaging collectively as part of a larger antiwar political culture. "VVAW provided an introduction to the larger society," Barry insisted. "Many Vietnam veterans never thought about anybody else's issues as being important, or something to even think about or take seriously. By working in coalition, lots of people said, 'Hey, you know, we ought to help this other group. This is also important.'" ⁸ In this way, VVAW did for veterans what underground newspapers did for New Leftists: provided an intellectual, community-building framework through which veterans could interrogate past assumptions and begin to reformulate a new set of politics and identity. ⁹

VVAW, of course, never spoke for all Vietnam-era veterans. Even at its peak in the early 1970s when it claimed a membership of 25,000, it represented (numerically, at least) only a subset of the wider Vietnam-veteran population. While former VVAW spokesman Bobby Muller once said, "Every Vietnam veteran that I knew was a member of VVAW," the truth of the matter is that many did not join the organization and by the middle of the decade had gravitated toward more traditional veterans' groups. ¹⁰ The nation's leading servicemen's association, the American Legion, acknowledged that attracting Vietnam veterans could be difficult. "He's a new breed of

⁸ Barry, interview, *Winter Soldiers*, 401.

⁹ McMillian, *Smoking Typewriters*, 4, 6-7.

¹⁰ Philip Caputo, James Fallows, Robert Muller, et al., "Symposium" [May 1980], in *The Wounded Generation: America After Vietnam*, ed. A.D. Horne (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1981), 118, 120.

cat,” noted Wayne Keefe, a Legion representative from Oskaloosa, Iowa, in 1974. “You’ve got to sit him down and tell him what the Legion can do for him. He wants his money’s worth if he’s going to join.”¹¹ But join they nevertheless did. In 1974, the Legion boasted a half-million Vietnam vets as members. The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), the country’s second largest organization, thrived just as strongly with 450,000 Vietnam-era veterans. As its public relations officer John Smith touted: “We’ve got 18 per cent of the eligible Vietnam vets. Percentage-wise, it’s the highest of any war. World War II ran about 11 or 12 per cent.”¹²

Looking only at the numbers, however, obscures VVAW’s influence. Whereas the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars might have counted more Vietnam veterans among their ranks, the direct impact they had on Vietnam vets was less obvious. Although more traditional veterans’ organizations would eventually claim substantial numbers of Vietnam-era dues payers, they failed to provide the same energizing and politicizing atmosphere that inspired a generation of VVAW activists. Indeed, VVAW offered its members a dynamic, youth-centered environment premised on empathy, action, and healing. At its most basic level this meant just being there for their brothers in need. Veterans often had trouble articulating their feelings aloud, especially in the presence of family, for fear of reprisal. So real was this threat that John Durant, an early VVAW member, considered getting his parents to understand his antiwar position one of his major victories as an activist — a feat not all veterans achieved. “A lot of the parents of the guys I know well are coming around,” said Durant.

But I’ve also heard of a lot of guys who are afraid to go against their family or even tell them how they really feel. The parents of one of our guys threw him out of the house, and won’t let him talk to his younger brother who’s just home from the service. And I’ve got a guy staying with me till he finds a place — a

¹¹ Kay Bartlett, “Veterans’ Groups Still Thriving,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, April 14, 1974.

¹² *Ibid.*

Marine, wounded twice, whose parents threw him out when he came home with peace literature. Some guys succumb to their parents; he didn't.¹³

In such cases, VVAW became a tremendous source of strength for weathering difficult times; “a forum to meet other guys, to share experiences and to rap through it,” Bobby Muller concluded.¹⁴

Beyond offering a safe, non-judgmental environment for its members, VVAW also experimented with creating local grassroots programs to assist Vietnam veterans readjust to civilian life. Exactly how successful these projects were in reaching out to, and meeting the needs of, the vast numbers of struggling veterans strewn across the country is difficult to quantify. VVAW's archival record, while not insignificant, contains only the crudest of glimpses into the inner-workings of its various community efforts. Preferring action to exposition, VVAWers labored with an urgency and impatience that typically precluded formal documentation. They were not career activists. Or at least they did not start out this way. In fact, most members assumed that when the war concluded so too would VVAW. And yet, the organization's impact far exceeded such expectations. Its rap groups, drug treatment initiatives, R&R farms, multi-issue service centers, and discharge upgrade projects offered creative examples later institutionalized by not-for-profit veterans' rights organizations and government agencies alike, reaching thousands of veterans annually. VVAW's political prisoner campaigns, GI activism, and support for movements of self-determination, likewise, produced generally positive results, offering sound assistance to those who, like Vietnam vets, were left neglected or victimized by the state.

Some projects were no doubt adopted in haste and abandoned as a result of poor planning. Others suffered from a lack of funding, or a chapter's apathetic base. VVAW was a membership-driven organization and the national office could only compel chapters to do so

¹³ Polner, *No Victory Parades*, 61.

¹⁴ Caputo, Fallows, Muller, et al., “Symposium,” 118.

much, if anything at all. Thus, if one or two people had the time and energy to plan and organize a project, that project could usually get off the ground. But unless other members in the chapter adopted the initiative as their own, it often dwindled away; hence the ephemeral nature of much of VVAW's grassroots programs. Ephemeral, however, did not necessarily mean ineffective. How long a project lasted certainly mattered, but for many of VVAW's most desperate constituents — whether a beleaguered political prisoner or a veteran not covered by the VA owing to a bad discharge — any help was good help. Even the failed Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Clinic in Bogue Chitto, Alabama, after all, managed to provide temporary medical care to its patients, however rudimentary.

VVAW, obviously, could have had an even greater impact if its members had been less impetuous at times. But in the end, the significance of VVAW's community activism went far beyond the longevity and influence of a given project. Considered more broadly, these outreach programs, like the group's thoroughly decentralized structure, linked VVAW to a wider antistatist movement that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the unraveling of liberalism. Weary of those unfeeling systems of power and bureaucratic hierarchies that informed their lives in the military and as veterans, VVAWers latched on to the principles of localism, opposition to centralized authority, and a dedication to self-help as a way achieving their social and political reformation. How individual members articulated these concepts differed among chapters, though all seemed to agree that in the absence of greater balance between government and the people, the consolidation of power in the postwar liberal state had gone too far and needed to be reined in. For those Democratic doves in VVAW this meant empowering Congress and formulating alternative legislation to decentralize the VA. For counterculture rebels and anarchists it meant founding subterranean counter-institutions based on

mutuality and face-to-face relations. For so-called radicals, it meant extending the group's activism to other struggles for self-determination, and a turn toward combating more systemic issues of racism, sexism, and imperialism. And still, for an even greater number of VVAWers, it meant an assortment of all of the above.

Recognizing the unifying nature of VVAW's antistatism, expressed in all its different varieties, illustrates the difficulty of categorizing sixties activism into such rigid binaries as "liberal" and "radical," or even "left" and "right," for that matter. While such terms are always relative, and inevitably shaped by the times in which they are applied, using them has often had the unintended consequence of making the political spectrum on the Left appear narrower than it actually was. Just as historians have challenged the sharp line once thought to divide politicians from counterculture hippies, revealing the porous nature of politics and culture in the 1960s and 1970s, scholars today should begin to reconsider the divisions separating liberal and radical activists. As Robbie Lieberman notes in her study on campus protest in the Midwest, "[A]ctivists tended to focus more on what they had in common than on their differences."¹⁵ Dissimilarities undoubtedly divided liberals and radicals, especially those liberals wedded to the postwar Washington establishment, but in the space between these two poles sat a range of activists whose exact politics could not be pinned down, let alone encapsulated by such open-ended descriptors. As the example of VVAW demonstrates, activists represented an array of politics, even when united under the same organizational umbrella.

The correlation between rebellious liberals on the one hand and radical activists on the other is not altogether surprising. By the early 1970s, the war had become a source of such wide-

¹⁵ Robbie Lieberman, *Prairie Power: Voices of the 1960s Midwestern Student Protest* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 15. On the interconnected nature of political and cultural protest in the sixties, see also Doug Rossinow, "The New Left and the Counterculture: Hypotheses and Evidence," *Radical History Review* 67 (1997): 79-120; and Rossinow, "'The Revolution Is about Our Lives': The New Left's Counterculture," in *Imagine Nation*, 99-124.

spread contempt on the liberal-left that George McGovern's 1972 bid for the presidency developed into one of the most "insurgent" mainstream political campaigns of the postwar period, uniting feminists, gay rights advocates, civil rights workers, Black Power activists, and antiwar student demonstrators together in common cause.¹⁶ But aside from an increasingly shared rejection of the war, and the political status-quo in Washington, liberals and radicals on the Left were steeped in a similar intellectual tradition. Before their exposure to Marx and Lenin, American leftists frequently cut their teeth on the works of Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau, cultivating a deep suspicion of consolidated political forms that threatened individual liberty. The libertarian right, too, shared these historical antecedents, often invoking the likes of Thoreau, Jefferson, and Paine to support their own anti-government positions.¹⁷ This shared inheritance was not insignificant, but reflective of a longstanding dissident tradition in the United States stretching back to the Anti-Federalists and their "decentralized vision of federalism." Far-ranging and pliable, Anti-Federalist localism has spawned countless iterations since the late eighteenth century, often less the result of self-conscious appropriation than automatic reflex.¹⁸

The penchant for decentralism in the 1960s and 1970s stemmed in part from a growing irritation with the postwar liberal state's infatuation with large institutions, rationalism, and top-down hierarchies of power. While conventional wisdom derived from our current political culture would suggest that conservatives want less government and progressives covet more, the example set by VVAW shows this not to be the case. Activists in VVAW often proved just as antistatist sharing with the libertarian right a preference for smallness, face-to-face relations, voluntarism, community control, and self-help. But whereas conservatives extolled the virtues of

¹⁶ Miroff, *Liberals' Moment*, 180-184; Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 248-275.

¹⁷ Jack Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority* (New York: The New American Library, 1966), 33; DeLeon, *American as Anarchist*, 127.

¹⁸ Cornell, *Other Founders*, 11-12, 304, 305-306; DeLeon, *American as Anarchist*, 126.

a social and economic system based entirely on *laissez-faire* individualism, VVAWers (and others like them) relied on a less atomistic understanding of human relations that aimed to localize and devolve state power to a more human scale within the context of community. While they may not have used verbatim some of the key words that form the framework of this study — terms like “New Deal order,” “liberal state,” or “antistatism” — the actions of VVAWers over the course of years of political struggle, combined with the simple yet powerful language found in their newsletters and poems, speeches and correspondences, oral histories and memoirs, form a rich tapestry of resistance against the failures and excesses of a government claiming to represent them. This was perhaps best exemplified in the group’s grassroots response to the culture of mismanagement and neglect that typified the Veterans Administration. Instead of seeking to privatize the VA, and replace it with a system of rugged self-reliance, VVAW developed cooperative solutions organized on the basis of communal assistance and person-to-person intimacy. The resulting configuration was an environment wherein the individual, instead of being separate from or subservient to the community, evolved and reached his full potential through it.

Even today, in an era when anti-government politics are uncritically associated almost exclusively with the Right, large portions of the American Left continue to align themselves with nation’s enduring antistatist heritage. The recent Occupy Wall Street movement is a case in point. Beyond its obvious opposition to the use of tax-payer dollars to bailout those financial institutions most responsible for the 2008 economic meltdown, Occupy protesters expressed equal disenchantment with the unresponsive nature of America’s democratic process; the undeterred growth of corporate capitalism under Republican and Democratic administrations alike; and the growing inequality of middle- and working-class families in relation to the

country's super rich. Its goal, plainly stated, was to make America's political and economic structures more receptive to the needs and interests of the "99 percent."¹⁹ It might be observed here that VVAWers fought for a similar set of principles: the desire for greater control over the institutions affecting their daily lives. That this ethos is held as strongly by activists on the Left as those on the Right demonstrates how, despite the historical dominance of the postwar liberal state, the continued grip on the nation's political conscience by ideas of decentralism, deeply rooted in celebrations of individual empowerment, shows no signs of abating.

¹⁹ For an incisive overview of the Occupy movement, see Todd Gitlin, *Occupy Nation: The Roots, the Spirit, and the Promise of Occupy Wall Street* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012).

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